

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## Spoletto Festival Commissions a World Premiere Opera for the 2024 Season: *Ruinous Gods* Explores the Trauma of Refugee Children

An operatic dreamscape of *uppgivenhetssyndrom*, a psychological response to the state of displacement

*Composed by Layale Chaker with a libretto by Lisa Schlesinger*

**June 10, 2023 (Charleston, SC)** —Spoletto Festival USA’s General Director & CEO Mena Mark Hanna announced today the institution’s commission of *Ruinous Gods*, a new full-length chamber opera by Layale Chaker and Lisa Schlesinger that explores how mass displacement triggers profound psychological trauma amongst its youngest sufferers. Co-produced and co-commissioned by Spoleto Festival USA, Opera Wuppertal, and Nederlandse Reisopera, *Ruinous Gods* will receive its world premiere next May as part of Spoleto’s 2024 season.

Grounded in testimonies from survivors and families of those afflicted by *uppgivenhetssyndrom*, or resignation syndrome, the evocative opera follows the experiences of a mother, Hannah, and her 12-year-old daughter, H’ala, who suffers from a traumatic response to the state of living in the limbo of displacement. Evident in refugee camps around the world, resignation syndrome causes the child, most often between the ages of 8 to 15, to fall into a non-responsive sleep. This opera uses elements from myths and fairy tales to create a 21st-century fantasia.

Loosely based on the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter, *Ruinous Gods* traces H’ala’s journey to an “underworld” landscape where she is joined by other children who have fled their homes. As H’ala sleeps, Hannah navigates the effects of her daughter’s detachment and faces unforgiving realities of their refugee status. Though the work does not name a specific setting, pointed moments allude to camps on the island of

Lesvos, the practice of familial separation, deadly water crossings, and a figure named “Jeb Fezos.” Despite the painful context of the characters’ situation, the work finds moments of levity in the darkest moments.

“This is a work about forced migration, with themes that should be at the forefront of our minds,” says Mena Hanna. “Evoking the current crisis at the US Southern border and the calamities happening in the Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East, *Ruinous Gods* speaks to the maddening political morass that drags down the world’s most vulnerable. Reverberations of this piece shook me to my core, especially as a father.”

Worldwide, more than 117 million people are displaced, and nearly half of them are children, notes librettist Lisa Schlesinger, a transdisciplinary writer and theater activist committed to social and eco-justice. “The United Nations Human Rights Council commission on the welfare of children declared that 7 million children are deprived of their liberty. Yet children literally embody the future. This opera challenges us to save the future for the children by examining our current ecological and environmental state as well as the discriminatory practices against its many inhabitants.”

Schlesinger’s initial thoughts for this project began pre-pandemic, and since she and composer Layale Chaker began collaborating in early 2020, have continued to evolve the work. “The refugee crisis is as relevant today as ever,” says Schlesinger. “This April, asylum seekers were purposely abandoned on an emergency life raft in the Aegean Sea. The stories are everywhere—we cannot close our eyes to them.”

Schlesinger and Chaker state that *Ruinous Gods* also “challenges political otherness through music that amplifies marginalized voices and incites and fosters curiosity, connection, empathy, and openness.”

“In the past four years, this work has seen many rewrites as we responded to drastic changes in current events,” says Chaker. “Yet the core of this work remained constant: that our common human condition always lies in the palms of our children’s hands. This story invites reflection on current political and social practices, and their repercussions on the young.”

Musically, the work is rooted in the traditions of Arabic Maqam and Western classical music. Created for six soloists, a chorus, and a chamber ensemble of strings, oboe/English horn, bassoon, flute, clarinet, harp, percussion, and piano, the score includes the use of a microtonal keyboard. “Its musical branches reach a multitude of musical landscapes and languages spanning contemporary classical music with influences from Arabic, Ottoman, Hindustani, Persian, Hindustani music, as well as jazz and free improvisation,” continues Chaker. “It alludes in form and structure to the Chorus in ancient Greek tragedy, while some sung texts also stem from Babylonian and Assyrian divinations and incantations. The music of *Ruinous Gods* crosses different fields, including spoken word, pushing boundaries of forms and structures. Likewise, this musical experimentation

aims to challenge canonical rules, rethinking microtonality, the relationships between untampered modality and tempered harmony, and cyclical and linear rhythms.”

Additional opera details, including the cast and creative team, will be announced later this year.

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#### LAYALE CHAKER (COMPOSER)

Deemed a “Rising Star” by *BBC Music Magazine*, violinist and composer Layale Chaker was raised on the verge of several musical streams since her childhood. She debuted her musical training at the National Higher Conservatory of Beirut in her native Lebanon and later pursued her musical studies at Conservatoire de Paris and the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Chaker’s musical world lies at the intersection of classical contemporary music, Jazz, Arabic Music, and improvisation. She has worked with Daniel Barenboim and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Ziad Rahbani, Johnny Gandelsman, Holland Baroque, Oxford Orchestra, New World Symphony, London Jazz Festival, Alderburgh Festival, Junger Kunstler Festival Bayreuth, Lucerne Festival, Beethoven Festival Bonn, and Avignon Festival, among others. She has been featured at The Berlin Philharmonic, Abbaye de Royaumont, Hancher, The Stone, National Sawdust, Royal Albert Hall, and the Wigmore Hall.

This season she completed a year-long residency at WQXR, where she premiered a new work with her chamber jazz quintet, and completed a recording with string quartet ETHEL, to be released in summer of 2023. This June, she will premiere a new work for violin and choir with the choral ensemble Capella Amsterdam and a clarinet and violin concerto with the New York Philharmonic and the Lincoln Symphony Orchestra in October 2023.

Inner Rhyme, her debut release with Sarafand, was listed as “Top of The World” by *Songlines* magazine with a 5-star review, Top 10 NPR Best Releases, #1 for several weeks on the World Charts of iTunes and Amazon Music, and received praise by *The New York Times*, *The Strad*, *Strings Magazine*, *Jazz World*, and *Rootsworld*, among others.

A 2020-2022 Jerome Hill Fellow, Chaker is also a recipient of the Opera America Discovery 2022 award, Nadia et Lili Boulanger 2019 laureate, finalist of the Rolex Mentor & Protege 2018 Prize, the recipient of the Diaphonique Franco-British Commission Prize 2019, the 2018 Arab Fund for Arts and Culture Grant, the Royal Academy of Music 2018 Guinness Award, and the winner of the Ruth Anderson 2017 Competition.

#### LISA SCHLESINGER (LIBRETTO)

Lisa Schlesinger is a transdisciplinary writer, theater activist, and educator committed to social and eco-justice. Lisa has received commissions from the BBC, the Guthrie Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, and fellowships from NEA, TCG, CEC Artslink International, the Sloan Foundation, among others.

Produced nationally and internationally, her work is published in *American Theatre Magazine*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Broadway Plays*, *NoPassport*, *Playwrights Canada Press*, *The New York Times*, and beyond.

Schlesinger’s Middle Eastern theater activism works include *Twenty-One Positions* (Broadway Plays Press) with

Naomi Wallace and Abdelfattah AbuSrou; *A Dream of the Sea*, commissioned by Palestine National Theatre; and *The Gaza Monologues* with Ashtar Theatre.

Schlesinger's works range from intimate kitchen/table theatre to performance parades in occupied cities. Her plays include the *Celestial Bodies Trilogy*, *Rock Ends Ahead* (BBC International Playwriting Award), and *The Bones of Danny Winston* (Sundance finalist). She is currently working on The Iphigenia Project, begun in 2014, a transdisciplinary series of collaborative works focused on the global refugee and immigration crisis. *Iphigenia Point Blank*, a film opera and the first full-length performance in the Project, will premiere in New York in 2023.

### **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 47th 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 & CEO 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.

**MORE:** Visit the [virtual press room](#).

### **NEDERLANDSE REISOPERA**

The Nederlandse Reisopera (Dutch National Touring Opera) is the largest touring opera company of the Netherlands and based in the city of Enschede. For nearly 70 years, the Reisopera has made and coproduced innovative yet accessible opera productions for audiences of all ages and all walks of life. Currently, the company produces four operas each season. The Reisopera is the first opera company in the world to work with an Artistic Board: a diverse team of experts in the fields of technology, inclusiveness, diversity, and dramaturgy who advise and reflect on the artistic choices and programming of the opera company. During the 2023/24 season, the Nederlandse Reisopera presents *Das Wunder der Heliane* (Korngold), *Jevgeni Onjegin* (Tsjaikovski) *Powder Her Face* (Adès) and *Orphée et Eurydice* (Gluck).

### **WUPPERTAL OPERA**

The Wuppertal Opera, founded in 1905 at the initiative of Wuppertal's citizens, is a testament to the city's strong commitment to the arts and culture. Partnered with the Theater (Director, Thomas Braus) and Symphony Orchestra (Music director, Patrick Hahn), the three artistic companies share a commitment to innovation, inclusion, and accessibility. Artistic Director Rebekah Rota assumes leadership of the Wuppertal Opera in 2023/24 and will combine her years of experience in Germany with a fresh American perspective to strengthen the Opera's reach and relevance.

Captivating stories, authentic acting, and moving singing are the heart of opera. By focusing on these elements, the Wuppertal Opera aims to build bridges—not only between genres and styles, but also across the divide of the art form’s supposed elitism—and thereby simplify accessibility. New voices will be offered a platform, both onstage and behind the scenes. Artistic Director Rebekah Rota demonstrates this artistic concept in her inaugural season with, among others, Du Yun’s contemporary opera, *Angel’s Bone*.