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“Let the light shine on Festival Opera.”

- San Francisco Classical Voice

31st Season

Festival Opera presents an all-new production of

Vincenzo Bellini’s

NORMA

Cast led by acclaimed singer Shana Blake Hill

With the Festival Opera Orchestra & Chorus

Directed by Mark Foehringer

Conducted by Bryan Nies

Cast features acclaimed singers

Ashley Dixon, Dane Suarez, Kevin Thompson,

Marcus J. Paige and Lily Bogas

2 performances only! July 8 and 10

Hofmann Theatre - Leshner Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek

Tickets now on sale at FESTIVALOPERA.org or by calling (925) 943-7469

(WALNUT CREEK, CA – May 31, 2021) Walnut Creek’s revitalized Festival Opera, led by General Director Zachary Gordin, continues its 31st season with an all-new production of Bellini’s *Norma*, featuring acclaimed singer Shana Blake Hill (*she/her*) in the title role, directed by Mark Foehringer and conducted by Bryan Nies, with the Festival Opera Orchestra and Chorus. *Norma* will have two performances on Friday, July 8 at 7:30pm and Sunday, July 10 at 2:00pm in the Hofmann Theatre at the Leshner Center for the Arts, located at 1601 Civic Drive in Walnut Creek. *Norma* will be performed in Italian with English supertitles.

The cast features acclaimed singers Ashley Dixon as Adalgisa (*she/her*), Dane Suarez (*he/him*) as Pollione, Kevin Thompson (*he/him*) as Oroveso, Marcus J. Paige (*he/him*) as Flavio, and Lily Bogas (*she/they*) as Clotilde.

Tickets for *Norma* are available at FestivalOpera.org or by phone at 925-943-7469.

Set against the struggles of culture and religion in Roman occupied Gaul, *Norma* is an epic story of love, lust, and the struggle for power. The druid high-priestess and daughter of King Oroveso, Norma is secretly in a love affair with a man who should be her enemy; the Roman proconsul Pollione. After years

of hiding their affair - breaking Norma's vow of purity - and two children together, Pollione becomes infatuated with a young novice priestess: Norma's confidante Adalgisa.

Norma is now tasked with leading a rebellion against the Roman legions. She is in deep conflict over the fate of her children in the impending war. Adalgisa is torn between love for Pollione, betrayal of Norma and of her own vows. Pollione is driven by his desire for dominance. Betrayal, heartbreak, rage and the clash of cultures weigh heavily on this love triangle. In the end someone will have to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Packed with vocal fireworks, achingly beautiful arias and fierce characters, this iconic opera stands at the pinnacle of the bel canto repertoire. Even Wagner, who didn't like Italian opera, admired Bellini and **Norma** tremendously as an example of the essence of what opera can emotionally deliver.

The creative team for **Norma** includes - Director of Production: Frederic Boulay, Scenic Designer: Peter Crompton, Lighting Designer: Matthew Antaky, Costume Designer: Marina Polakoff, Wig & Makeup Designer: Denise Gutierrez, Chorus Master: Bruce Olstad, and Stage Manager Jennifer Hsu.

Festival Opera's General Director Zachary Gordin, says, "Bellini's **Norma** will bring a stunning display of vocal fireworks to the Leshner Center for Arts, joined by the forces of our outstanding orchestra and chorus. I'm thrilled to present an incredible cast of principal artists from around the country and introduce our audience to emerging local artists on the path to major operatic careers."

Led by General Director Zachary Gordin, Festival Opera is committed to community building through culturally rich and diverse programming, increased equity and access for underrepresented communities, and producing operatic and vocal masterworks with the highest artistic standards. The company believes in a world where the historic barriers of our theatre are broken down, a world in which they can provide the community with an invitation and a safe space for all people to gather and experience the power of music.

Festival Opera was founded in 1991 by Dr. Theodore Weis, who, twenty years earlier had helped create the Arizona Opera Company in Tucson. Past leadership includes the artistic direction tenures of famed soprano Olivia Stapp, and Maestro Michael Morgan of the Oakland Symphony. Festival Opera is committed to presenting emerging and local artists in compelling and socially relevant productions of new and classic repertoire. Festival Opera gives emerging artists a venue to hone their craft in leading roles with the guidance and collaboration of established professionals - providing a vital launching pad for their professional future. FO alums have gone on to perform in major opera houses and symphony halls around the globe. Memorable past stagings include Mozart's *Don Giovanni* set in a contemporary nightclub, Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* highlighting the human and political struggles we face, Floyd's *Susannah* echoing the #metoo movement, and Massenet's *Werther* set in the 1950s.

Festival Opera's General & Artistic Director, Zachary Gordin, has joined a cadre of cutting-edge visionaries in opera leadership that are giving audiences and artists hope that the art form will survive and thrive in seasons to come. Gordin brings to this new role the artistic experience of a decades-long career as a critically acclaimed baritone, praised for his "arresting musical insights" and a voice that is "commanding and intense without ever descending into coarseness" (*The Seattle Times*); he brings a proven track record, along with a breadth of experience as an impresario, conductor, educator, artist mentor and organizational consultant. Some of his operatic highlights include Germont in *La Traviata*, Escamillo in *Carmen*, and Enrico in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Silvio in *Pagliacci*, and many others. On the concert stage, he has been hailed for his interpretations of the masterworks of Brahms, Faure, Handel, and Mozart, the orchestral song cycles of Mahler, and most frequently for Orff's *Carmina Burana*. His ties to composer Jake Heggie's works include critically acclaimed performances of *Dead Man Walking*, as the convict Joseph De Rocher, Manfred in *For a Look or a Touch*, and dozens of his songs performed in recitals around the US.

Of his debut as Festival Opera's Artistic Director, *San Francisco Classical Voice* wrote: "A gripping production of Carlisle Floyd's tragedy *Susannah* this past weekend made it clear that Festival Opera has returned to full production in high gear. After several years of reduced offerings, the Walnut Creek-based company, with newly appointed artistic director Zachary Gordin, brought this lush American opera to the Leshner Center with savvy stage direction and first-class music from singers and orchestra." The same publication later named FO "Best New Discovery" in their annual "Best of the Bay" awards. Gordin has since created the Festival Opera Artist Recital Series, where audiences can experience principal artists in an intimate salon setting, featuring innovative and inclusive programming. His promotion to General Director is a harbinger of many more innovations and artistically uplifting seasons for this newly restored cultural asset of the Bay Area.

Bryan Nies, conductor is the Principal Conductor of Festival Opera, former Associate Conductor of the Oakland Symphony, Lecturer at Stanford University, and continues to conduct engaging modern opera and symphonic concerts. He returned to Festival Opera to conduct performances of Mozart's *Die Entführung* in a Star Trek-themed production in 2016, Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* in 2017, and Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* in 2019. With West Edge Opera, he conducted the West Coast premiere of Laura Kaminsky's *As One* and has conducted Erling Wold's last three operas: *Queer*, *Certitude and Joy* (World Premiere), and *Uksus*. In 2012, he completed an eight-year tenure as Principal Conductor of Oakland Youth Orchestra, which he led on international tours including Costa Rica and Australia and New Zealand during the orchestra's 40th season. Nies conducted sold-out performances of Puccini's *Turandot*, Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*, and Bizet's *Carmen* at Festival Opera to rave reviews that stated, "Nies is undeniably a talent to watch." In addition, he has been a cover conductor for the St. Louis Symphony, conducted performances with Opera Idaho (*Così fan tutte* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*), and the Oakland Chamber Ensemble. With *Eugene Onegin*, Bryan made his Opera San José debut as principal conductor after serving as assistant conductor for 12 company productions between 2003 and 2012: *Don Pasquale*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *The Crucible*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Manon*, *La Rondine*, *Werther*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Die Fledermaus*, *La voix humaine*, *Pagliacci*, and the West Coast premiere of *Anna Karenina*, becoming the second conductor to perform the work.

Pursuing an avid interest in all musical genres, Nies has also been an associate music director with American Musical Theater of San José, Theatreworks in Palo Alto, was on the faculty at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and San Jose State University where he was director of orchestras and opera. He regularly performs in recital and has debuted his first recording "*Amour sans ailes: Songs of Reynaldo Hahn*" on the MSR Classics label which was named "Best Lieder Recording of 2017."

Mark Foehringer, director

Over the past 42 years in the dance industry, Mark Foehringer has created a professional dance organization, directed two pre-professional dance programs and made works for dance companies, directed operas and developed collaborative projects with musicians and other artists. He is a producer, presenter, director, teacher, choreographer and mentor. Foehringer is an internationally active choreographer and dance educator. He has directed his San Francisco based contemporary dance organization, Mark Foehringer Dance Project|SF (MFDP|SF), since 1996. He choreographed and taught throughout the US and abroad, working with organizations that include: Rambert School of Contemporary Dance in London; Ballet Nacional del Perú; Ballet San Marcos of Lima; and Cisne Negro Dance Company of Brazil. Outside of Northern California and the San Francisco Bay Area, Foehringer's company has been seen in Aruba; New York City 1999, 2000, 2005 at Joyce Theater, 2012 at Ailey Theater, 2014 at Peridance Theater, and 2018 at Lincoln Center; Perú 2007, 2008, 2012, 2013 and 2015.

Foehringer is a professor of dance at the School of Music and Dance at San José State University in San José, CA. Additionally, he has taught at Dominican University/Lines Ballet BFA (professor); Stanford University (guest teacher); San Francisco State University(residency) and guested with many companies and schools in the Bay Area. Beyond work for dance companies and educational programs, Foehringer

has collaborated on productions with Festival Opera, West Bay Opera, San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Children's Creativity Museum of San Francisco. For Festival Opera, Foehringer has directed productions of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Gounod's *Faust*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Verdi's *La Traviata*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* and Kurt Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins*, and Floyd's *Susannah*.

Calendar Listing for *NORMA*

Venue: Hofmann Theatre at the Leshner Center for the Arts, located at 1601 Civic Drive in Walnut Creek.

Dates: Friday, July 8 at 7:30pm and Sunday, July 10 at 2:00pm

Tickets: www.festivalopera.org Box office: (925) 943-7469

About the artists in *Norma*

Shana Blake Hill, Norma

Shana Blake Hill has distinguished herself throughout her career as a singing actress who loves a challenge. Career Highlights include: Rosalba in Daniel Catan's *Florenzia en el Amazonas* with Los Angeles Opera and Cincinnati Opera, Mimi in *La Bohème* with Los Angeles Opera, Violetta in *La Traviata* with Dayton Opera, Leila in *Pearl Fishers* with Fargo Moorhead Opera, the title role in *Aida* with Opera Southwest and Baltimore Concert Opera, Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro* with Opera Southwest, Roberta in *An American Tragedy* by Tobias Picker (West Coast Premiere), Nedda in *Pagliacci* with Sacramento Opera, *Les Chants D'Auvergne* with The Naples Philharmonic, *Mahler 4* with The Florida Philharmonic, *Mozart Requiem* with Northwest Sinfonietta, Maria in *West Side Story* with the Lexington Philharmonic, *Beethoven 9* with The Pacific Symphony, Rodrigo's *Ausencias de Dulcinea* with The Los Angeles Philharmonic and *Carmina Burana* with the New West Symphony.

Some of Ms. Hill's World Premieres and projects include: Bright Sheng's *The Phoenix* for soprano and orchestra with Philadelphia Orchestra and Seattle Symphony (available on the Naxos recording label), Sakagawa in Michael Ching's opera *Corps of Discovery* on the Lewis and Clark expedition, Sally Hemings in Glenn Paxton's opera *Monticello* on the controversial personal life of Thomas Jefferson commissioned by NPR Selected Shorts radio broadcast (now available on Audible), Ticie in *On Gold Mountain*, an opera by Nathan Wang (commissioned by Los Angeles Opera) on the novel by Lisa See, *Sara's Diary: 9/11*, a dramatic song cycle on prose by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Leroy Aarons, and both Rosalba and Florenzia Grimaldi in Daniel Catan's acclaimed opera *Florenzia en el Amazonas*.

In the genre of film Ms. Hill was chosen by legendary film composer Jerry Goldsmith to record the title track "The Mission" which opens Paramount's Blockbuster film *The Sum of All Fears*. Ms. Hill's performance of "The Mission" was recently chosen to be part of Paramount Studios newly released 90th Anniversary Favorite Soundtrack Compilation CD. Other media credits include solos on the soundtracks of the feature film "Red Dirt" and the Sci-Fi Series "Seven Days to Midnight", most recently she is heavily featured on the soundtrack of the short film "God don't like Ugly", by Grammy winning producer Adreo Heard which examines interracial marriage in the south during the 1960s.

Ashley Dixon, Adalgisa

Mezzo-soprano Ashley Dixon, a Grand Finals winner of the 2018 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, is quickly establishing herself as one of the most exceptional artists of her generation. Possessing a “robust instrument full of beguiling vocal colors, as well as formidable technical command” (The San Francisco Chronicle), she is at home in a repertoire spanning three centuries. In spring of 2020, Ms. Dixon made her critically acclaimed debut with the Los Angeles Opera, stepping into a run of performances as Sara in *Roberto Devereux* alongside bel canto veterans Ramon Vargas and Angela Meade. Of these performances, she was praised as having “an exquisite gentleness... Dixon inhabits her persona, remains likable, inured to any judgment. With her melodious and precise voice, Dixon navigates her character’s dilemmas with sure-fire finesse (LA Excites).” Ms. Dixon continued to perform last season as a featured guest artist with Opera San Jose. In addition, she joined Atlanta Opera for performances as the title role in *Carmen* and appeared in San Francisco Opera’s Holiday Gala. Future engagements include the title role in *Lucrezia* for Opera Louisiane, Annio in *La clemenza di Tito* at the Ravinia Festival, and Carmen in Hawaii Opera Theatre’s production of *The Tragedy of Carmen*.

Dane Suarez, Pollione

Praised for his "big, heroic voice" (LA Weekly) and "powerful emotions," tenor Dane Suarez has developed an exciting and varied career. In the winter of 2020, Mr. Suarez returned to West Bay Opera to perform the role of Macduff in their production of *Macbeth*. For the remainder of the 2020 season, he was scheduled to reprise the role of Rodolfo in *La bohème* with Fort Worth Opera, perform the title role in *Faust* with Opera Neo, and make his role debut as Manrico in *Il trovatore* with Opera in the Heights. In the summer of 2020, Mr. Suarez was thrilled to perform the role of First Armored Man in Opera Neo’s innovative digital production of *The Magic Flute*.

For 2020-2021, Suarez debuted with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra for their holiday concert, returned to Opera Memphis as Scalia in Derrick Wang's acclaimed *Scalia/Ginsburg*, returned to Maryland Opera for a live streamed concert. His 2021-2022 season includes a concert for Il Cenacolo Club of San Francisco, a return to Opera Memphis starring as the tortured Canio in *Pagliacci*, his debut as Manrico (*Il trovatore*) with Opera in the Heights, a debut with New Jersey Festival Orchestra for The Three Holiday Tenors concert, a return to Maryland Opera for a livestreamed concert entitled Variant Valentine, a return to his alma mater (Butler University) as guest Tenor Soloist in Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*, a reprisal of Scalia (*Scalia/Ginsburg*) with both Penn Square Music Festival and Opera in the Heights, two company debuts as Rodolfo with Newport Classical and Opera Birmingham, and his role and company debuts as Pollione in *Norma* with Festival Opera.

Kevin Thompson, Orovoso

Hailed as “a stentorian bass” by the New York Times, Kevin Thompson possesses a voice with extraordinary range, depth, and color, combined with a commanding stage presence. Upcoming engagements include his Washington National Opera debut in Strauss’ *Elektra*, *Aida* for Ft. Worth Opera, January in Zaid Jabri’s *Southern Crossings* for Barnard College, the First Nazarene in *Salome* for Tulsa Opera, Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* for Nashville Opera, the Old Hebrew in *Samson et Dalila* for Bob Jones University, Orovoso in *Norma* for Festival Opera.

Recent engagements include Polonius in Ruse Opera’s *Hamlet*, Monterone in Tulsa Opera’s *Rigoletto*, the Old Gypsy in *Aleko* for the New York City Opera, Thibault in *Maid of Orleans* both with the New Orleans Opera and Odyssey Opera, the American debut of Bottesini’s *Ali Baba* with Southwest Opera, Solomon in Gounod’s *La Reine de Saba* with Odyssey Opera, Korngold’s *Das Wunder der Heliane* with Maestro Botstein at the Bard Festival, Wagner’s *Rienzi* at the Kennedy Center, Osmin in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Festival Opera, Basilio in the *Barber of Seville* with Opera Hong Kong, Angelotti in *Tosca* with Opera Tampa, the Captain in Daniel Catan’s *Florencia en el Amazonas* with the New York City Opera.

Marcus J. Paige, Flavio

Marcus J. Paige is a rising stage actor and tenor, whose performance skills have been described as “arrestingly powerful”, and “enchantingly resonant, both nimble in voice and staging with memorable physicality.” With an educational background in Vocal Performance from Chapman University's Hall-Musco Conservatory of Music, his versatile vocal prowess has created many opportunities in the fields of opera, recital, concert, musical theater, commercial music and straight plays. Hailing from Southern California, Mr. Paige has performed leading roles with other companies of note, including Long Beach Opera, Virginia Musical Theatre, Berlin Opera Academy, the New Conservatory Theatre Center, Festival Opera, and Shea’s Performing Arts Center in New York.

His most cherished stage experiences include *L'elisir d'amore* (Nemorino), and *The Last Five Years* (Jamie). A winner in the Mirabel Schloß concert series competition in Salzburg, Austria, his international credits include *Ariadne auf Naxos* (Brighella & Tanzmeister), and *Die Zauberflöte* (Monostatos) in Berlin, Germany.

Lily Bogas, Clotilde

Lily Bogas, mezzo-soprano, is currently an opera student at the Eastman School of Music. Recent credits include: Taller Daughter in Missy Mazzoli’s *Proving Up* with Eastman Opera, Dido in *Dido and Aeneas* with Sonoma State University, Cinderella in *Into the Woods* with Throckmorton Theatre and #13 in the West Coast premiere of *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe with Marin Theater Company.

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