

For Immediate Release

THE
SANTA FE
OPERA



THE SANTA FE OPERA PRESENTS AN ONLINE
SCREENING OF *IS THIS AMERICA?*
FEATURING SCENES FROM A NEW OPERA
ABOUT THE LIFE & WORK OF VOTING RIGHTS
ACTIVIST FANNIE LOU HAMER

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Santa Fe, NM — On Friday, October 23 at 6:00 pm MT the **Santa Fe Opera** and **Center for Contemporary Arts** will present a special online screening of *Is This America?*, a workshop of the new, one-act opera *This Little Light of Mine* commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera. The work portrays key events in the life of voting rights activist **Fannie Lou Hamer**. A black woman of humble origins, she spoke truth to power and her tireless efforts culminated in the passage of the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**.

The consequences of the U.S. 2020 presidential election will be historic. Amid a global pandemic, our polarized nation will strive to mobilize millions of voters in States from coast to coast. Despite discrimination, harassment and brutality, Fannie Lou Hamer fought earnestly to ensure that African Americans had the right to vote. This Fall, the Santa Fe Opera will join with other organizations in supporting the **“Get Out the Vote”** campaign through the development and national screening of *Is This America?*

As part of the Center for Contemporary Arts’ *Living Room Series*, the national screening of *Is This America?* will be followed by a panel discussion with stage director **Beth Greenberg**, composer **Chandler Carter** and librettist **Diana Solomon-Glover**. The panelists will discuss the origins of their new opera, *This Little Light of Mine*, and the importance of hearing the collective voices of all U.S. citizens in the November 3, 2020 presidential election.

About the Filming

Is This America? will be filmed during a private workshop event* on October 10, 2020 aboard the **Mary A. Whalen**, a historic oil tanker located in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The tanker is the flagship of the non-profit PortSide NewYork. ***Limited press passes are available through the Santa Fe Opera’s Community Engagement Department. Following the filming, the *Is This America?* program content will be available for non-profit “Get Out the Vote” organization usage at no charge. Please send requests for workshop press passes or program content usage to the Santa Fe Opera’s Department of Community Engagement at community@santafeopera.org.**

About *This Little Light of Mine*

This Little Light of Mine is a one-act opera that dramatizes the story of Fannie Lou Hamer, a former sharecropper who rose to national prominence at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. In the opera,

adopted daughter Dorothy Jean Hamer tells how Fannie Lou and her husband ‘Pap’ took in foster children as their own; how the injustices of the Jim Crow laws emboldened Fannie to demand the right to vote for African-Americans; and how Fannie shook the political world during “Freedom Summer” by helping to found the **Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party**. Describing to the Convention Credentials Committee her harrowing story of harassment, arrest and beating by the police, Fannie Lou Hamer pointedly asked: “Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?” *This Little Light of Mine* is in development as part of the **Opera for All Voices** program, fostered by the Santa Fe Opera and its consortium partners.

About the Creative Team

The creative team for *This Little Light of Mine* includes composer Chandler Carter, librettist Diana Solomon-Glover, stage director Beth Greenberg, music director **Jeri Lynne Johnson** and pianist **Michelle Cann**. Chandler Carter’s work focuses on historical stories that cross boundaries of race and power. In addition to works for the stage, Mr. Carter has composed over 50 songs and numerous choral, chamber and orchestral pieces which have been performed internationally by distinguished recitalists, choirs and ensembles. Diana Solomon-Glover’s career and talents have been showcased on the operatic stage, in concert, oratorio, recital, musical theater, cabaret and on radio and television across the United States, Canada, Europe, the Caribbean and in Central America, and have long served humanitarian and social efforts. In 2001, Ms. Solomon-Glover created the role of Winnie Mandela in the premiere of American composer Chandler Carter’s *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, an opera based upon the life of South African President, Nelson Mandela. Beth Greenberg has more than 25 years of experience producing, directing and managing live, large-scale concert and theatrical productions in both indoor and outdoor venues. Ms. Greenberg is renowned for her work with the New York City Opera and she has staged world premieres and traditional works for Opera Colorado, Fort Worth Opera and the Phoenicia Voice Festival, among other U.S. companies. Jeri Lynne Johnson is heralded as one of today’s leading female conductors. Maestra Johnson established her own orchestra in Philadelphia, the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, to serve as a model for the 21st-century American orchestra. Described by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as “first-class on every level,” Black Pearl’s musicians have trained at leading music conservatories around the globe and combine artistic excellence with cultural diversity and innovative community engagement. Under Maestra Johnson’s leadership the Black Pearl has received numerous grants and awards including a record-breaking three prestigious Knight Foundation Arts Challenge grants. Concert pianist Michelle Cann is a young artist with a deep musical commitment to performing a wide range of repertoire throughout the U.S. and to bringing the arts to all communities. Of Ms. Cann’s New York City premiere of *Concerto in One Movement* by Florence Price, the *Boston Musical Intelligencer* wrote, “Michelle Cann...was a compelling, sparkling virtuoso, bringing this riveting work to life in its first New York performance.”

About the Cast

Nicole Joy MitchellFannie Lou Hamer
Briana Elyse HunterTanya
Heather HillJune Johnson/SNCC Worker
Carol SzweiCoro #1/Jasmine
Jacqueline GreggCoro #2/Sarah
Jacob TerrellCoro #3/Bus Driver
Roosevelt CreditCoro #4/Protest Leader

The role of Fannie Lou Hamer will be performed by powerhouse contralto **Nicole Joy Mitchell**. Ms. Mitchell is a native of Brooklyn, New York where she sang the world premiere of *Songs from the F Train* and is a frequent concert soloist with The Walt Whitman Project in Brooklyn, New York. Former Santa Fe Opera Apprentice Singer **Briana Elyse Hunter** creates the role of Tanya. Ms. Hunter has been hailed by *Opera News* as “a mesmerizing mezzo-soprano with a fiery theatrical presence and dynamic vocalism.” Ms. Hunter began her 2019/20 season with a world premiere performance of Augusta Read Thomas’ *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun* with the Santa Fe Opera. An accomplished stage actress, Ms. Hunter has worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Manhattan School of Music and the American Musical Theater Ensemble. The roles of June Johnson and SNCC Worker will be presented by soprano **Heather Hill**. Ms. Hill’s career encompasses appearances in opera, oratorio, musical theater, television and film. She recently performed with the Broadway company of *The Phantom of the Opera* and the Broadway revival of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. Other recent performances include the New York premiere of *Gloria* by Robert Harris at Alice Tully Hall, and performances of *Carmina Burana* and the *Lord Nelson Mass* at Carnegie Hall.

About PortSide NewYork

PortSide connects New Yorkers to the benefits of our waterways and ports. PortSide produces WaterStories programs in education, culture, resiliency and job training, for youth and adults, on and off their flagship, the historic ship Mary A. Whalen and in the virtual realm. PortSide has a commitment to Black history expressed in their African American Maritime Heritage program that covers issues, communities, and exceptional individuals at a national level and reveals stories of achievement, daily life and the struggles against racism and the sea.

For Calendar Editors

- **WHAT:** An online screening of *Is This America?*, a workshop of the new opera *This Little Light of Mine* about the life of voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, followed by a panel discussion with the creative team and presented by the Santa Fe Opera and Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.
- **WHEN:** Friday, October 23 at 6:00 pm MT.
- **HOW:** Interested parties may register via the [CCA’s website](#). The event is free; donations are accepted.

About Support for *Opera for All Voices* and *This Little Light of Mine*

Commissioning and development support for *Opera for All Voices* was provided by the **Melville Hankins Family Foundation**, Principal Education Sponsor of the Santa Fe Opera; **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**; and two **OPERA America Innovation Grants**, generously funded by the **Ann & Gordon Getty Foundation**. The commission and production of *This Little Light of Mine* is made possible by an OPERA America Innovation Grant and the generous support of the Melville Hankins Family Foundation.



The mission of the Santa Fe Opera is to advance the operatic art form by presenting ensemble performances of the highest quality in a unique setting with a varied repertory of new, rarely performed, and standard works; to ensure the excellence of opera's future through apprentice programs for singers, technicians, and arts administrators; and to foster an understanding and appreciation of opera among a diverse public.

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