

THE
SANTA FE
OPERA



For Immediate Release

THE SANTA FE PRESENTS THE WORLD
PREMIERE OF *SWEET POTATO KICKS THE SUN*
ON OCTOBER 26 IN DOWNTOWN SANTA FE

24 October 2019

Contact: Emily D. Moore | media@santafeopera.org | 505-986-5908

Santa Fe, NM — On Saturday, October 26, the Santa Fe Opera will present the world premiere of *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun* by Grammy-winning composer **Augusta Read Thomas** and Orpheus Prize-winning librettist **Leslie Dunton-Downer**. The piece is the first of four new works commissioned by the **Opera For All Voices: Stories of Our Time** initiative. The Santa Fe Opera is proud to be the lead producer.

The piece is described by the composer as “art without prototype that expands the definition of opera.” She adds, “I’ve worked hard to give everyone on stage Agency (with a capital A!), yet at the same time, the piece and its players are profoundly woven and integrated. The carefully nuanced and sculpted score, which took me over three years to compose, invites the creation of a gorgeous sonic kaleidoscope and animates artists to work together to further music’s flexible, diverse capacity and innate power.”

The title character Sweet Potato has no gender and is what the librettist calls, “a trickster with a cosmic dose of raw, archaic energy.” Sweet Potato is wildly destructive, but in a way that can deeply regenerate creativity and even preserve life. Sweet Potato is joined on stage by a cast of singing and acting characters, a special guest artist, a youth chorus composed of 15 high school students and a 7-musician ensemble (though it should be noted that the work is written for 6 players).

The world premiere of *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun* takes place at the Lensic Performing Arts Center in downtown Santa Fe at 6:00 PM on October 26.

The Cast & Creative Team

Music Director and Chorus Master **Carmen Flórez-Mansi** leads a talented young cast, each making their Santa Fe Opera debut. Soprano **Amy Owens**, a former Santa Fe Opera Apprentice, sings the title role of Sweet Potato. Mezzo-soprano and former Santa Fe Opera Apprentice **Briana Elyse Hunter** performs the roles of Grandfather BeeKeeper, Grandmother SeedKeeper and City Dweller #1. Baritone **Dominik Belavy** sings the role of 89, a hummingbird. **Dawn Lura** is the Actor, playing numerous roles, and **Rachel de la Torre** is the supernumerary. Renowned beatboxer and YouTube sensation **Nicole Paris** appears as the Special Guest Artist.

The creative team includes Stage Director **John de los Santos**, Scenic Designer **Liliana Duque Piñeiro**, Costume Designer **Ashley Soliman** and Lighting/Projection Designer **Noele Stollmack**.

The Production

Defying a traditional synopsis, *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun* is described by the composer/librettist team as: "A celebrated Artist takes the stage to perform and is alarmed to find that an opera is about to start in the same space. Before the mix-up can be sorted out, the opera begins. The dismayed Artist watches and reacts as the opera unfolds." Writes composer Augusta Read Thomas, "In the opera, Nicole, the Special Guest Artist, beatboxes and sings. The other vocalists sing and, from time to time, develop a wide variety of vocalizations akin to beatboxing. As such, the opera organically unfolds a sound world where different musical traditions crisscross and are deeply integrated. I see this opera as embracing diverse musical traditions, artists and audience members."

Opera for All Voices

Opera for All Voices (OFAV) is an initiative committed to co-commissioning and co-producing new operatic works for audiences of all ages that bear the same artistic integrity and depth of storytelling as mainstage works. There is additionally a commitment to social impact and the representation of diverse voices through the development of these new and important works. The initiative is also distinguished by its goal to commission works that keep in mind an economy of means and are therefore accessible to a wide range of producing companies.

OFAV was guided by a consortium of opera companies led by **The Santa Fe Opera** including **Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Minnesota Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, San Francisco Opera, Sarasota Opera,** and **Seattle Opera** — resulting in the commission of new works flexible in both scope and scale, which can be performed in a variety of venues away from the mainstage. The teams behind the commissioned works were selected through an invitational process and adjudicated by a jury of twelve distinguished individuals in the field of opera.

About Augusta Read Thomas

The impressive body of work by Grammy-winning composer Augusta Read Thomas embodies unbridled passion and fierce poetry. *The New Yorker* calls her "a true virtuoso composer." *The Huffington Post* wrote, "This is music that is always in motion, as if coming perpetually out of a magician's hat. It leads but doesn't direct, and is playful and subtle, dancing on light feet. It is music that conjures." Championed by luminaries like Barenboim, Rostropovich, Boulez, Eschenbach, Salonen, Maazel, Ozawa, and Knussen, she rose early to the top of her profession. An influential teacher at Eastman, Northwestern, Aspen Music Festival and Tanglewood, she is only the 16th person to be designated University Professor at The University of Chicago. Thomas was the longest serving Mead Composer-in-Residence for Barenboim and Boulez at the Chicago Symphony (1997-2006), culminating in the premiere of *Astral Canticle*, one of two finalists for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in Music. During her residency, Thomas premiered nine commissioned works and was central to establishing the thriving MusicNOW series. She has won the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, among many other coveted awards. In 2013-14, Thomas' work was performed more than that of any other living composer. Thomas is a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Thomas was named the 2016 CHICAGOAN OF THE YEAR. Her discography includes 87 commercially recorded CDs.

About Leslie Dunton-Downer

Leslie Dunton-Downer has written extensively for composer Augusta Read Thomas. Their first work, *Ligeia*, premiered in Evian, France under the baton of Mstislav Rostropovich and, on receiving the 1994 International Orpheus Prize for Best Chamber Opera under jury president Luciano Berio, was produced in Spoleto, Italy with Luca Ronconi directing. Other librettos include *Belladonna* for composer Bernard Rands and the Aspen Music Festival's 50th anniversary, David Zinman conducting; *Droit dans la flamme*, about the life and work of Rumi, for La Péniche Opéra in Paris; and most recently *Redrum*, a Gamut Inc. production for Berlin's historic 'Theater in Delphi,' where cabaret scenes for the TV series *Babylon Berlin* are filmed. Other works include co-authored guides published by Dorling Kindersley in London, *Essential Shakespeare Handbook* and *Opera*, together translated into over a dozen languages.

World Premieres at The Santa Fe Opera

Since its founding in 1957, the Santa Fe Operas has demonstrated an unflagging commitment to new works. Thirteen of sixteen of its world premieres (twelve of which were commissioned by the company) have been by American composers, with six 21st-century American works premiering since the turn of the millennium: Bright Sheng's *Madame Mao* (2003), Paul Moravec's *The Letter* (2009), Lewis Spratlan's *Life is a Dream* (2010), Theodore Morrison's *Oscar* (2013), Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain* (2015) and Mason Bates's *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (2017).

About The Santa Fe Opera

Lauded by *The Wall Street Journal* as "the Rolls-Royce of American summer opera festivals," the Santa Fe Opera annually draws 85,000 people from New Mexico and around the globe. Nestled atop a mountain vista in northern New Mexico, the company's iconic **Crosby Theatre** offers a nightly seating capacity of 2,126. The covered theatre is open on three sides, allowing visitors to enjoy performances complemented by the elements. Since 1957 the company has presented over 2,000 performances of 170 operas by 89 composers, including 16 world premieres and 45 American premieres.

Media Resources for *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun*

[High-Resolution Imagery](#)

[Director's Notes from John de los Santos](#)

["Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun" Production Detail Page](#)

[Video feature: Beatboxer Nicole Paris and Augusta Read Thomas redefine opera](#)

["Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun" feature video 1](#)

["Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun" feature video 2](#)

["Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun" feature video 3](#)

["Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun" trailer](#)

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Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun

Music by Augusta Read Thomas

Libretto by Leslie Dunton-Downer

World Premiere, October 26, 2019

The Lensic Performing Arts Center, 6:00 PM

Sung in English

Commissioned by a consortium led by The Santa Fe Opera including:

The Santa Fe Opera, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Minnesota Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis,
San Francisco Opera, Sarasota Opera and Seattle Opera

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Creative Team

Music Director & Chorus Master: **Carmen Flórez-Mansi***

Director: **John de los Santos***

Scenic Design: **Liliana Duque Piñeiro***

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Cast

Sweet Potato: **Amy Owens*+**

Grandmother BeeKeeper/Grandfather SeedKeeper/City Dweller #1: **Briana Elyse Hunter*+**

89: **Dominik Belavy***

Special Guest Artist: **Nicole Paris***

The Actor: **Dawn Lura***

Supernumerary: **Rachel de la Torre***

Baby Honeybees/Pigeons/Woodpeckers: **Youth Chorus**

Ensemble

Violin: **Ruxandra Marquardt**

Cello: **Katie Rietman**

Flute: **Danielle Frabutt Garcia**

Clarinet: **Tim Skinner**

Piano: **Jacob Greenberg**

Percussion: **Gregg Koyle and David Tolen**

*Santa Fe Opera debut, +Former Santa Fe Opera Apprentice

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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