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## EPIC SEASON AT HOUSTON GRAND OPERA BEGINS WITH INTELLIGENCE

👤 SHERRY CHENG · HOUSTON MUSIC · APRIL 6, 2023

**H**ouston Grand Opera’s 2023-24 season is nothing short of epic. “We are producing some of the grandest and most mature artistic works in the repertoire all in one season,” says Khori Dastoor, HGO General Director and CEO. “Verdi’s last opera, Wagner’s last opera, late Mozart—these pieces are Mount Everest, each one of them.”

After a bold post-pandemic season that fueled confidence in the strength of the company, HGO is at the top of its game, back in full force with ambitious programming that not only showcases the most exciting voices of the opera world but looks toward the future of the art form with an unprecedented collaboration.

For the first time in its history, the company will launch its season with a world premiere, the HGO-commissioned opera *Intelligence*, co-created by superstar American composer Jake Heggie, librettist Gene Scheer, and director/choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, 2021 MacArthur Fellow and founder of Urban Bush Women, the galvanizing Brooklyn-based dance company centering the voices of Black women.

Heggie, the composer of celebrated American operas *Dead Man Walking*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Three Decembers*, and *Moby Dick*, has had a long and fruitful relationship with HGO, having premiered five of his works with the company. "We will premiere *Intelligence* at the same moment the Metropolitan Opera opens its season with *Dead Man Walking*," says Dastoor. "So you'll have Jake's first opera and his tenth opera opening two major American companies' seasons this fall. That's an extraordinary thing in itself."

Eight years in the making, *Intelligence* began with a chance encounter. Heggie was visiting the Smithsonian when a docent recognized him and pulled him aside. He asked Heggie if he knew Elizabeth Van Lew and Mary Jane Bowser. When Heggie replied no, he told the composer to look them up and make it his next opera. Heggie and his librettist began researching the two women, one a white abolitionist and the other a former slave of her family. The two formed a pro-Union spy ring, gathering information that had a major impact on the outcome of the Civil War.

As Heggie and Scheer went on a journey of understanding this untold story and its context within the Civil War and American history, they realized they needed an African American woman's perspective. "Jake talks a lot about the opera being the perfect vehicle to examine individual stories in the context of large societal movements," explains Dastoor. "So many stories got lost to history for various reasons, the women who were invisible, the people of color whose contribution got erased—the story of these two women are at the core."

Heggie and Scheer brought Zollar on board and they set out to explore the story and conceive the work together. The Urban Bush Women tell stories in narrative form and work in a very different way from a traditional ballet company or a contemporary dance company. "Jawole is a storyteller," says Dastoor. "The Urban Bush Women are the ancestors. They are the past. They are the present. They are omnipresent in telling the story and moving the action of the plot forward. Jawole brings a deep knowledge of African traditions around blending of the dead and the living, myth and reality."

*Intelligence* (Oct. 20-Nov. 3, 2023) will feature HGO Studio alumna Jamie Barton as Elizabeth and soprano Jani Brugger in her company debut as Mary Jane. Acclaimed Trinidadian conductor Kwamé Ryan will also be making his HGO debut on the podium. Along with eight dancers from Urban Bush Women, this new American epic will be brought to life through a powerful fusion of music, spoken word, and dance.



*Intelligence* director, choreographer and artistic director of Urban Bush Women Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. Photo courtesy of the artist.