

SFJAZZ

OperaParallèle 



TERENCE BLANCHARD'S

CHAMPION

AN OPERA IN JAZZ

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TERENCE BLANCHARD'S *CHAMPION:* *AN OPERA IN JAZZ* w/OPERA PARALLÈLE

A groundbreaking work combining the disciplines of opera and jazz, Terence Blanchard's *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* tells the real-life story of world champion boxer Emile Griffith, a man haunted by memories of his past, who struggled to reconcile his sexuality in a hyper-macho world. Produced by SFJAZZ in conjunction with San Francisco's Opera Parallèle, *Champion* is a visually stunning production featuring elaborate staging and video elements with a jazz trio, orchestra, and chorus, bringing out the full glory of Blanchard's soulful score as it illuminates a tragic story that remains acutely relevant today. Tormented by the death of opponent Benny Paret following their 1962 bout for the welterweight title, Griffith spent his life questioning himself and a society that would accept his accidental killing of a fellow athlete, but not his bisexuality. With a libretto by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Michael Cristofer, the opera features renowned bass Arthur Woodley reprising his role as the boxer Emile Griffith. Far more than one of jazz's most prodigious trumpeters, Blanchard has carved out a brilliant career as an A-list composer. His work was premiered at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in June 2013, and he has substantially re-worked the piece for this exclusive series of performances on the Miner Auditorium stage, the first since the premiere.



TERENCE BLANCHARD, COMPOSER

CHAMPION

AN OPERA IN JAZZ

FROM OPERA PARALLÈLE'S ARTISTIC LEADERS

Terence Blanchard's powerful jazz-fusion opera *Champion* does what opera does best—explore the human condition. In the work's ten scenes, we experience the real-life story of world champion boxer Emile Griffith through a series of flashbacks. Struggling with dementia, Griffith is tormented by the memories of his conflicted sexuality and the death of his taunting opponent Benny Paret, following their 1962 bout for the welterweight title. Griffith spent his life questioning himself and a society that would accept his accidental killing of a fellow athlete, but not his bisexuality. As stated in his iconic quote:

“I KILL A MAN and most people understand and forgive me. However, I LOVE A MAN, and to so many people this is an unforgivable sin.” —EMILE GRIFFITH

Blanchard, a leading pillar in the world of jazz, has crafted a uniquely insightful score that evokes the complex range of emotions in this harrowing story and clearly sets the time and place of the narrative, from 1950's Caribbean Islands to 1970's Harlem. The vast palette of colors in his sound-world combined with his careful treatment of the text propels the dramatic arc of the work.

Opera Parallèle deeply believes that storytelling is most effective in an intimate space. And what better place than SFJAZZ Center's boxing-arena-like setting, with the audience as spectators, for this story to come to life. Forty-four short and contrasting movements shifting from present to past create a challenge for presenting a clear narrative. The theatrical environment is designed to navigate the flashbacks and to help our singers tell a coherent story. Our production design utilizes the arena space, with immersive projections on and around the boxing-ring stage. These projections represent both the haunted world of fragmented dementia and Griffith's colorful memories that lie between.

What a privilege to partner with SFJAZZ to bring this west-coast premiere. Thank you for being opera "Champions".



NICOLE PAIEMENT, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



BRIAN STAUFENBIEL, CREATIVE DIRECTOR

CHAMPION

AN OPERA IN JAZZ

CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE



ARTHUR WOODLEY: Emile Griffith

KEVIN GINO: Luis Rodrigo Griffith, Emile's adopted son and caretaker

MARK HERNANDEZ: Ring Announcer

KENNETH KELLOGG: Young Emile Griffith

KAREN SLACK: Emelda Griffith, Emile's mother

ROBERT ORTH: Howie Albert, Emile's trainer

MICHELLE RICE: Kathy Hagan, a bar owner

AISHA CAMPBELL: Cousin Blanche

MOSES ABRAHAMSON (Feb. 19, 21, 24, 27): Little Emile

EVAN HOLLOWAY (Feb. 20, 23, 26, 28): Little Emile

VICTOR RYAN ROBERTSON: Benny 'Kid' Paret/Benny Paret Jr, a boxer/his son

CHABRELLE WILLIAMS: Sadie Donastrog Griffith

BRADLEY KYNARD: Man in a Bar

CO-PRESENTED BY SFJAZZ AND OPERA PARALLÈLE

Conducted by **NICOLE PAIEMENT**

Directed by **BRIAN STAUFENBIEL**

Composed by **TERENCE BLANCHARD**

Libretto by **MICHAEL CRISTOFER**

CHORUS OF PARADERS, REPORTERS, AND BOXING FANS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

ALYSSA CATALDI

MICHAEL MOHAMMED

CHESTER PIDDUCK

TAMARA RICHARDS

JOHN ROEVEKAMP

SABRINA ROMERO

YEMONJA STANLEY

ALEX TAITE

NICOLE TAKESONO

JOHN VITALE

KRISTA WIGLE

CARRIE ZHANG

DANCERS

CHRISTOPHER MALIK SIMON HAHN

OLANIYAN DA-DA OSEYE EAGLIN

JAZZ TRIO

PIANO

Edward Simon

BASS

Marcus Shelby

DRUMS

Jaz Sawyer

CHAMPION

AN OPERA IN JAZZ

ORCHESTRA

FLUTE

Amy Likar

OBOE

Kyle Bruckmann

CLARINET

Jeannie Psomas
Peter Josheff

BASSOON

Erin Irvine

FRENCH HORN

Alicia Telford
Susan Vollmer
Monika Warchol

TRUMPET

Graham Taylor
Ari Micich

TROMBONE

Hall Goff
Brendan Lai-Tong

PERCUSSION

Ben Paysen
Erika Johnson

HARP

Karen Gottlieb

VIOLIN 1

Roy Malan, concertmaster
Stephanie Bibbo
Sarena Hsu

VIOLIN 2

Carol Kutsch, Principal
Kevin Rogers
Marian Yang

VIOLA

Ellen Ruth Rose, Principal
Evan Buttemer

CELLO

Eric Gaenslen, Principal
Vanessa Ruotolo

CONTRABASS

Stan Poplin

PRODUCTION TEAM

NICOLE PAIEMENT: Artistic Director/Conductor

BRIAN STAUFENBIEL: Creative Director/Stage Director

MATTHEW ANTAKY: Lighting Designer

CHRISTINE CROOK: Costume Designer

DAVE DUNNING: Set Designer

DAVID MURAKAMI: Media Designer

JEANNA PARHAM: Wig and Makeup Designer

RYAN PARHAM: Props Artisan

REGINALD SAVAGE: Choreographer

LAURA ANDERSON: Production and Stage Manager

JULIE CHIN: Assistant Stage Manager

DAVID GORDON: Supertitles Operator

SASKIA LEE: Media Coordinator

WILLIAM LONG: Assistant Conductor

KEISUKE NAKAGOSHI: Pianist

ERIN NEFF: Assistant Director

KATHY ROSE: Production Manager

ARTISTIC SUPPORT

STEVE DiBARTOLOMEO: Production Photographer

SCOTT HORTON: Opera Parallèle Media Relations

PROPP+GUERIN: Opera Parallèle Design

OPERA PARALLÈLE STAFF

NICOLE PAIEMENT: Artistic Director, Founder

TOD BRODY: Executive Director

BRIAN STAUFENBIEL: Creative Director

JACQUES DESJARDINS: Artistic Administrator

ROMA OLVERA: Educational Programs Director, Office Manager

KATRINA ZOSEDER: Administrative Assistant

JULIE CHIN: Assistant to the Artistic Director

DAVID GORDON: Music Intern

CHAMPION

AN OPERA IN JAZZ

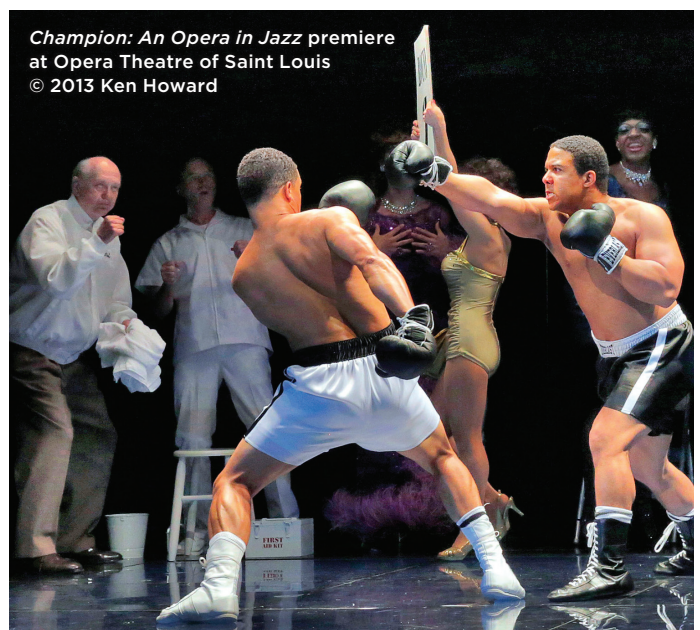
SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Scene 1 begins in Emile's apartment in Hempstead, Long Island. Emile Griffith is struggling to get dressed. Suffering from dementia, he is confused and haunted by his past. Luis, his adopted son and caretaker, reminds him to be ready for an important meeting with Benny Paret, Jr.

Late 1950's, Emile is a young man again in St. Thomas, the US Virgin Islands. He yearns to find his mother, Emelda, and make it big in America as a singer, a baseball player, and a designer of hats. Emile moves to New York. When he finds his mother, she is confused, not sure which of her seven abandoned children he is, but overjoyed. Hoping to find Emile a job, she takes him to meet Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer. Howie sees an opportunity: Emile is built like a boxer, not a hat-maker, and he sets his sights on training Emile as a fighter. Giving up his other dreams, Emile quickly develops into a talented welterweight. Lonely and confused by his success, Emile finds his way to a gay bar in Manhattan. Kathy Hagan, the owner, welcomes Emile to a world that frightens and attracts him. Emile confides in Kathy, revealing some demons from his past. As a boy, his cruel fundamentalist cousin Blanche forced him to hold cinderblocks above his head as punishment for having the devil inside him, a punishment that made him into a man of great physical strength.

1962, Emile encounters Benny Paret at a weigh-in for their upcoming fight. Kid Paret taunts the charismatic Emile, calling him "maricon," a disparaging Spanish word for a homosexual. Alone with Howie, Emile tries to talk to him frankly about why this word hurt him so deeply, but for Howie this is something that no one in the fight business wants to talk about. Howie leaves him and Emile wonders what it means to be a man. Emile and Paret prepare for the big fight. Paret continues to taunt Emile, who ultimately delivers seventeen blows in less than seven seconds and knocks Paret into a coma.



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SYNOPSIS

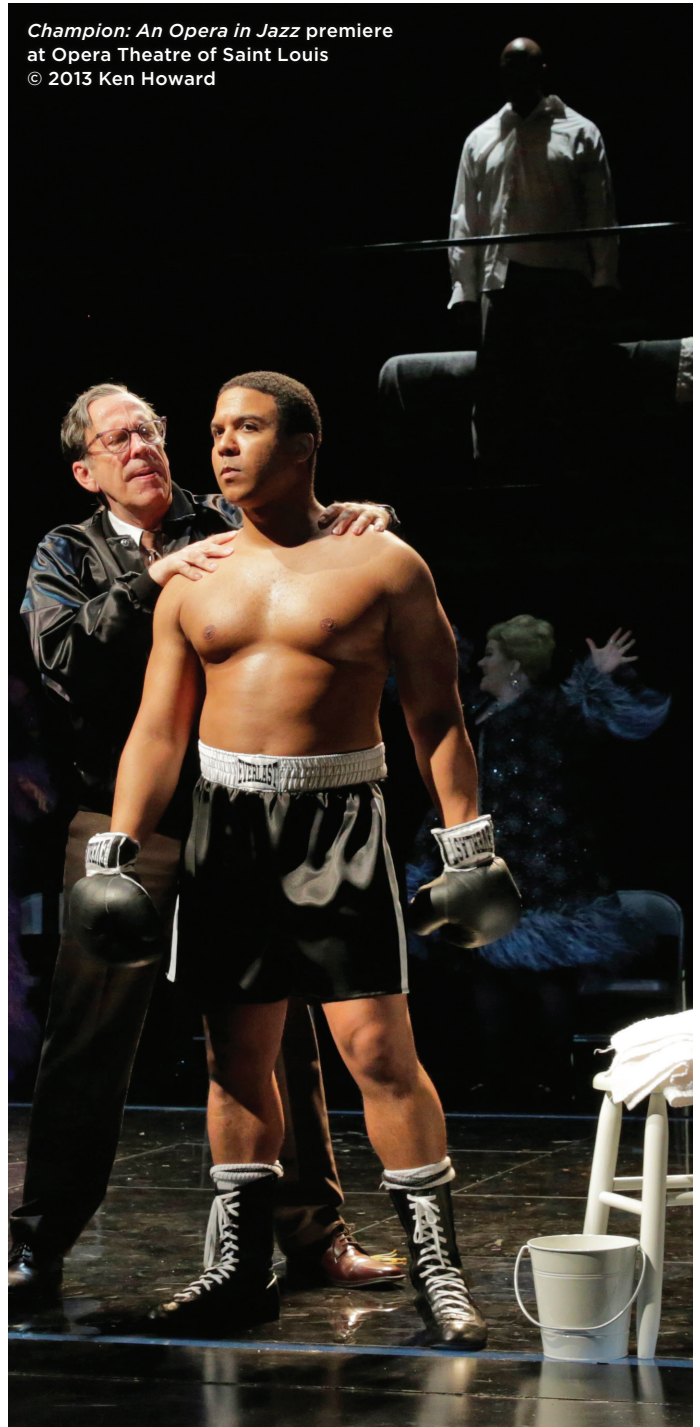
ACT II

Back in Emile's bedroom in the present, Emile is haunted by the ghost of Kid Paret who still questions his old opponent.

Mid-to late 1960s, Emile is enjoying a strong winning streak all over the world. Titles, trophies, and money roll in, but he remains disturbed by the death of Kid Paret. He tries living it up, and, denying his own identity, he takes a young bride, Sadie, although everyone including his mother Emelda, who remembers her own childhood back in the Islands, warns him against it.

Early 1970s, after the wedding, Emile's luck seems to have changed. He's now on a long losing streak and starting to display signs of "boxer's brain," or trauma-related dementia. Howie realizes that Emile's days are numbered and tries to console him, but Emile rejects Howie, as well as his wife and his mother. Instead, he looks for comfort back at Kathy's bar. Outside in the street, he is taunted by a group of thugs. They beat him violently, exacerbating his brain injuries.

Back in the present, Emile relives the nightmare of the attack. Luis tries to comfort him. "That was long ago," says Luis. In a New York City park, Emile asks for forgiveness from Benny Jr. Luis tells Benny that since that terrible evening Emile has struggled to find peace with what he's done and who he truly is. Back at home, the voices and memories subside. Emile Griffith, the former welterweight champ, can now take life one day at a time.



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BIOGRAPHIES

NICOLE PAIEMENT (CONDUCTOR) has gained an international reputation as a conductor of contemporary music and opera. Her numerous recordings include many world premiere works and she has toured extensively in the US and Asia. Paiement is an active Guest Conductor. She has recently been appointed Principal Guest Conductor at The Dallas Opera where she conducted the world premiere of Joby Talbot's opera *Everest* in 2015. Paiement was also the Artistic Director of the BluePrint Project at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Recently, she appeared as guest conductor with the Washington National Opera and the Saratoga Summer Festival. She will be conducting at Glimmerglass Opera this summer and at the Atlanta Opera in Fall 2016.

BRIAN STAUFENBIEL (DIRECTOR) is an active cross-disciplinary director and designer and has helmed the staging and design for Opera Parallèle since 2007. His adventurous stagecraft has won critical acclaim for the company's productions. This past year, Staufenbiel designed and directed the World Premiere of *Angel Heart*, performed at Cal Performances in Berkeley, Carnegie Hall in New York City, and Festival del Sole. He shared a residency at Banff with composer Luna Pearl Woolf to create an original theater piece premiered in Montréal. Upcoming engagements include directing in both Minnesota Opera and the LA Opera.

TERENCE BLANCHARD (COMPOSER/TRUMPETER) is jazz's foremost Renaissance man. A savvy bandleader, celebrated film composer, brilliant jazz writer, and influential educator, the GRAMMY-winning New Orleans native is a major creative force in the contemporary jazz scene. After an apprenticeship with jazz legend Art Blakey, Blanchard co-led a quintet with saxophonist Donald Harrison during the height of the "young lion" era of the 1980s, releasing five acclaimed sessions, before striking out on his own as a solo artist. He has composed over 40 movie scores, including soundtracks for the majority of director Spike Lee's work, making Blanchard the most prolific jazz artist working in film. As an SFJAZZ Resident Artistic Director, he is able to present programs that express the diversity of his vision, including the West Coast premiere of his opera *Champion: An Opera in Jazz*.

MICHAEL CRISTOFER (LIBRETTIST) is a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning playwright, filmmaker, and actor. He says of *Champion*, his first opera libretto, "For me, Emile's story not only asks the question of what it means to be a man, it asks what it means to be a human being."

ARTHUR WOODLEY (BASS) Emile Griffith has been acclaimed for his performances in both opera and concert. He has appeared at the Seattle Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Dallas Opera, San Francisco Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, and the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. Also a distinguished concert singer, he has performed with the San Francisco Symphony, National Symphony, New World Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Houston Symphony, and The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields. Mr. Woodley created the role of Emile Griffith in the world premiere of Terence Blanchard's *Champion* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

KENNETH KELLOGG (BASS-BARITONE) Young Emile Griffith is an alum of the Washington National Opera's Domingo-Cafritz Emerging Artists Program. Kellogg's roles in Washington have included Lord Rochefort in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Don Alfonso in *Così fan tutte*, Johann in *Werther*, and Angelotti in *Tosca*. He has made debuts with the Los Angeles Opera, Atlanta Opera, the Virginia Opera and Opera Tampa. Upcoming engagements include Sarastro in *The Magic Flute* at the Opéra de Lausanne, and a return to Washington in *Carmen*.

KAREN SLACK (SOPRANO) Emelda Griffith made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Verdi's *Luisa Miller*. She recently sang Sister Rose in *Dead Man Walking* with Madison Opera and Des Moines Metro Opera, Serena in *Porgy and Bess* with Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, and *Tosca* with the New Philharmonic. Engagements for 2015 and beyond include Verdi's *Aida* with Austin Lyric Opera, her role debut as Alice Ford in *Falstaff* with Arizona Opera, Mahler's 2nd Symphony with the Lexington Philharmonic, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Back Bay Chorale.

ROBERT ORTH (BARITONE) Howie Albert was named "Artist of the Year" by both New York City Opera and Seattle Opera. He has participated in the world premieres of Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* and *Moby-Dick*, Adams' *Nixon in China*, Gordon's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Blanchard's *Champion*, Argento's *A Waterbird Talk*, and created the title role in Wallace's *Harvey Milk*. With Nicole Paiement, Orth has collaborated on Machover's *Death and the Powers*, and twice on Maxwell Davies' *The Lighthouse* when he returns in Opera Parallèle's production in April at Z Space. Mr. Orth's performance is partially sponsored by Bernice and John Lindstrom.