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OPERA America Awards \$220,000 in Grants to Eight Companies to Develop New American Operas

January 12, 2026 (New York) — **OPERA America** is pleased to announce grants totaling \$220,000 to eight opera companies through its Repertoire Development Grants program.

The biennial Repertoire Development Grants provide financial support to OPERA America Professional Company Members for the development of new American operas and music theater works. Grants allow creators and producers to refine works-in-progress by funding creative fees and other costs, including those for lab productions, workshops, readings, and revisions.

Grants were awarded to eight opera companies:

- **American Lyric Theater** (New York, NY)
Tevye's Daughters (Alex Weiser, composer; Stephanie Fleischmann, librettist)
- **Austin Opera** (Austin, TX)
Ofrenda (Jorge Sosa, composer; John de los Santos, librettist)
- **Chicago Fringe Opera** (Chicago, IL)
Black Caesar: From Slave, to Pirate, to Legend (Khary Laurent, composer; Daryl Vincent Thomas and Khary Laurent, librettists)
- **HERE** (New York, NY)
Chimera (working title) (Angélica Negrón, composer and librettist)
- **Minnesota Opera** (Minneapolis, MN)
The Many Deaths of Laila Starr (Kamala Sankaram, composer; Minita Gandhi, librettist)
- **Opera Montana** (Bozeman, MT)
Project to Be Announced (Zach Redler, composer; Matt Foss and Kelley Rourke, librettists)
- **Opera Saratoga** (Saratoga Springs, NY)
DRIFT (Alyssa Weinberg, composer; J. Mae Barizo, librettist)
- **Pacific Opera Victoria** (Victoria, BC, Canada)
Opera Sprouts Initiative, including three works:
Bossy Girl Saves the World (Mishelle Cuttler, composer; Scott Button, librettist)
Howl (Chris Thornborrow, composer; Sarah Henstra, librettist)
How the Tortoise Broke its Shell (Tawnie Olson, composer; Blessing Nwodo, librettist)

(See below for additional information about the productions.)

Grantees were selected by a panel of industry leaders consisting of Priti Gandhi, senior advisor, Arts Consulting Group; Anita Gonzalez, librettist; Dave Ragland, composer; Joseph N. Rubinstein, composer; and Sarah Williams, founder and creative producer, SarahProduces LLC.

Repertoire Development Grants are made possible through OPERA America's Opera Fund, an endowment dedicated to supporting the creation and production of new work. OPERA America's Opera

Fund was launched by the National Endowment for the Arts, with support from the Helen F. Whitaker Fund, Lee Day Gillespie, Lloyd and Mary Ann Gerlach, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation.

More information about OPERA America's grant programs is available at operaamerica.org/Grants.

PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

 AMERICAN LYRIC THEATER GREAT OPERAS DON'T JUST HAPPEN	American Lyric Theater <i>Tevye's Daughters</i> Composer: Alex Weiser Librettist: Stephanie Fleischmann
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Inspired by the darker, grittier stories by Sholem Aleichem not included in *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Tevye's Daughters* centers on the tale of the beloved milkman's younger daughter Shprintse, who falls in love with a young man above her station. Like so many women of her generation, Shprintse has no choice but to navigate her crisis with silence. Galvanized by the literature of little-known female Yiddish writers, as well as *tkhines* — Yiddish prayers designated expressly for women — *Tevye's Daughters* rewrites that silence, giving voice to a generation of women whose stories have frequently been suppressed, omitted, or even erased. The opera moves between a shtetl in Ukraine in 1907 and a summer cabin in the Catskills in 1964 as Tseytl, Khave, and Beylke, now old women haunted by a vestigial memory submerged for more than half a century, can no longer look away from the past. The arrival of Rose, a granddaughter grappling with her own sexual identity, incites the sisters not only to remember Shprintse's traumatic story, but to come to terms with their shared tumultuous present.

	Austin Opera <i>Ofrenda</i> Composer: Jorge Sosa Librettist: John de los Santos
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Ofrenda is a powerful story inspired by Día de los Muertos traditions, *curanderas* (traditional healers) in México, and the mysticism that surrounds them. The opera centers on Macaria, a mother who becomes a healer, and her daughter, Pina. Macaria's dream is one shared by many hardworking parents — that her daughter might receive the education she never had and build a stable future. Pina, however, questions whether that dream is realistic for her and considers leaving school to help her mother. As the story unfolds, *Ofrenda* reflects the hopes we hold for our children, the sacrifices we make for their well-being, and a daughter's journey toward understanding and honoring those who

came before her. This 90-minute chamber opera, commissioned by Austin Opera, is scheduled for its world premiere in October 2026 at the Butler Performance Center in Austin, Texas.



Chicago Fringe Opera

Black Caesar: From Slave, to Pirate, to Legend
Composer: Khary Laurent
Co-Librettists: Daryl Vincent Thomas, Khary Laurent

Enslaved in Africa and bound for the New World, Caesar seizes his freedom in a daring revolt that hurls him into the ruthless world of piracy. Gifted with intelligence, charisma, and ferocity, he becomes “Black Caesar,” a feared captain navigating treachery, loyalty, and love on the high seas. As empires clash and rebellion brews, Caesar transforms from captive to conqueror — his legend born of blood, betrayal, and destiny. *Black Caesar: From Slave, to Pirate, to Legend* is a sweeping opera of power, liberation, and the unbreakable will of a man who refused to be chained by history.



HERE

Chimera (working title)
Composer and Librettist: Angélica Negrón

Chimera is a deeply personal chamber opera that explores the complexity and boundlessness of identity and connection. It will feature a chamber orchestra, vocalists, electronics, and film with drag queens performing multiple facets of the title character. *Chimera* draws on Angélica Negrón's joy as a young girl, watching her mom's friends put on shows; these friends were mostly men who dressed as women. The queer community in Puerto Rico was home for Negrón and her mother, providing a sense of belonging, safety, and artistic expression that Negrón has yet to experience elsewhere. Born out of Negrón's love for the drag community, *Chimera* is conceived as a live opera with film. Audiences will travel through a performance space, encountering a drag performer in an environment that reflects their personal story and its intersections with Negrón's fragmented childhood memories. The narrative lives in a docu-fiction space, a surreal reality that blends deeply personal memories with newly imagined ones. Performances combine lip syncing with live vocals. This unexpected staging explores how one's experience with opera shifts when voice is encountered in a new and unexpected way.



Minnesota Opera

The Many Deaths of Laila Starr

Composer: Kamala Sankaram

Librettist: Minita Gandhi

The Many Deaths of Laila Starr follows the fallen goddess of Death as she is cast down from the heavens to live among mortals in modern-day Mumbai. When humanity is on the brink of discovering immortality, Death is deemed unnecessary. Banished from her divine post, she awakens in the body of a young woman named Laila Starr and must navigate the chaos, beauty, and fragility of human life for the first time. Laila discovers that she now lives near the future inventor of immortality, a child named Darius Shah. Over the course of five acts and several of Laila's reincarnations, her journey entwines with Darius' as both grow, die, and meet again across time. Each encounter forces Laila to question her purpose and the meaning of mortality. From crowded Mumbai streets and funeral pyres to celestial boardrooms where gods argue over fate, the opera moves fluidly between worlds — mythic and mundane, divine and human. As Laila experiences love, loss, and longing, she learns that life derives its value not from its permanence but from its impermanence. The score draws on Indian classical colors, urban soundscapes, and Western orchestral writing to evoke the city's pulse and the spiritual weight of Laila's transformation.



Opera Montana

Project to Be Announced

Composer: Zach Redler

Co-Librettists: Matt Foss, Kelley Rourke

OPERA Montana looks forward to producing a new opera by composer Zach Redler and co-librettists Matt Foss and Kelley Rourke. The production will be announced in late January.



Opera Saratoga

DRIFT

Composer: Alyssa Weinberg

Librettist: J. Mae Barizo

DRIFT is a story of migration and climate change, exploring the forces that drive families from their homes into the uncertain refuge of new lands. Esmerelda's memory has been damaged in a country teetering on the brink of civil war. Braiding an intimate narrative between Esmeralda and her childhood friend, James, *DRIFT* opens in the glacial landscape of a post-war period scarred by ecological disaster. Swinging between the domestic and the surreal, the second act will return to the terminal green of the characters' youths as they navigate a toxic-laden panorama of swamplands and

power plants. Touching on themes of motherhood, exile, and climate change, the narrative delves into the complexities of identity and nationhood; *DRIFT* is a prismatic journey of migration, with all its losses and wonders.



Pacific Opera Victoria

Opera Sprouts Initiative, including:

- *Bossy Girl Saves the World*
Composer: Mishelle Cuttler
Librettist: Scott Button
- *Howl*
Composer: Chris Thornborrow
Librettist: Sarah Henstra
- *How the Tortoise Broke its Shell*
Composer: Tawnie Olson
Librettist: Blessing Nwodo

The grant will support the development of three operas for young audiences:

Bossy Girl Saves the World

A 10-year-old girl overhears her parents reading the news that the world must be saved. Due to her knowledge of bugs and science, she decides she knows how to save the world. When an environmental event threatens, Hortense struggles with whether to listen to the advice around her or to let her bossiness take over. What will that do to her friends and family?

Howl

What happens when the food chain is disrupted? When the wolves disappear from the forest, the greedy elk takes over and wreaks havoc on the environment. How can balance in the forest be attained again? The devastation in the forest is so great that eventually the wolf returns and almost catches the now extremely large elk. The elk is terrified and admits he may have gone a bit overboard. The forest regains its balance, and the animals learn about the importance of each individual's role. At the end, everyone learns to *Howl*!

How the Tortoise Broke its Shell

Based on a legend, during a time of drought, all the food and vegetation are gone, and the Tortoise and the birds are hungry. Luckily enough, there is a feast being held in the sky, and the Tortoise overhears this, but she has no wings to reach it. She uses her clever mind to trick the birds into helping her get there. Once there, out of fear that there won't be enough food, she also tricks the birds into letting her eat all the food herself. Angry, the birds take their feathers, and the Tortoise has to jump back to the ground. The audience chooses how the story will end in this "pick-your-own-adventure" narrative.



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ABOUT OPERA AMERICA

OPERA America (operaamerica.org) leads and serves the entire opera community, supporting the creation, presentation, and enjoyment of opera. The organization is committed to:

- Promoting collaboration and effectiveness among opera companies, universities, and allied businesses.
- Delivering professional development to artists, administrators, and trustees.
- Increasing appreciation of opera through educational and audience development resources.
- Offering support and services that foster the creation and presentation of new works.
- Fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion across all aspects of the opera industry.
- Undertaking national research and representing the field to policymakers and the media.
- Managing the National Opera Center, a custom-built facility that provides a centralized space for collaboration, rehearsal, and performance.

Founded in 1970, OPERA America fulfills its mission through public programs, an annual conference, regional workshops, consultations, granting programs, publications, and online resources. It is the only organization serving all constituents of opera: artists, administrators, trustees, educators, and audience members. Membership includes 200 professional opera companies; 300 associate, business, and education members; and 3,000 individuals. OPERA America extends its reach to 80,000 annual visitors to its National Opera Center and over 83,000 subscribers and followers on digital and social media. Representing over 90 percent of eligible professional companies, OPERA America is empowered to lead field-wide change.

Over the past five decades, OPERA America has awarded over \$24 million to opera companies and artists across North America. This strategic philanthropy, made possible through OPERA America's Opera Fund endowment and in partnership with committed foundations, supports new work development, audience building, civic practice, co-productions, and field-wide innovation at its member opera companies.

Awards to individuals advance the careers of women and people of the global majority in creative roles, highlight emerging artists, and recognize the leadership of exceptional trustees.