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Press images: seattleopera.smugmug.com/2324/X-The-Life-and-Times-of-Malcolm-X

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***X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X,*
by Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Davis,
comes to the Seattle Opera stage**

**Ambitious production by director Robert O'Hara
stars Kenneth Kellogg as Malcolm X**

**Appearances by Ilyasah Shabazz, Tamara Payne
headline slate of community events**

**Seattle Opera premiere
February 24–March 9
McCaw Hall**

SEATTLE—The groundbreaking opera [***X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X***](#) receives its Seattle Opera premiere February 24–March 9, following critically acclaimed performances at Detroit Opera, Opera Omaha, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Written in 1986 by **composer Anthony Davis** and **librettist Thulani Davis** to a **story by Christopher Davis**, *X* is the first opera written by a Black composer to run on Seattle Opera's main stage.

The production continues Seattle Opera's commitment to telling vital, modern-day stories by living American artists, joining *A Thousand Splendid Suns* ('23), *Bound* ('23), *Blue* ('22), *Flight* ('21), *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* ('20), *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* ('19), and *The Falling and the Rising* ('19) in just the last five years.

"Malcolm X is one of the most important, yet misrepresented, figures in recent US history," said **General Director Christina Scheppelmann**. "In light of America's ongoing reckoning with racial injustice—past and present—the time is right for us to revisit his life and legacy. There is perhaps no better art form than opera to explore a life of such cultural and historical significance, and it is long past time that this work, written nearly 40 years ago by a pivotal figure in American music, finally gets the attention it deserves."

The opera puts a spotlight on crucial moments in Malcolm X's spiritual and political life through a series of vignettes, following the iconic figure from his interrupted childhood in Lansing, Michigan, to his tragic murder in Harlem, New York. The score, by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Anthony Davis, fuses elements of modernism, minimalism, and jazz, producing a sound world that is unmistakably individual.

Performed only rarely following its staged premiere at New York City Opera in 1986, *X* is being revived in this new staging co-commissioned with Detroit Opera, Opera Omaha, the Metropolitan Opera, and Lyric Opera of Chicago.

For **composer Anthony Davis**, the opera's revival has clarified the prescience of Malcolm X's message. "Robert O'Hara's production of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* looks toward the future as it reveals the past," said Davis. "The opera tells Malcolm's story as an odyssey of spiritual transformation that symbolizes our ongoing resistance to racism and oppression."

The staging by **Robert O'Hara**, the Tony-nominated director of *Slave Play* ('18), features Afrofuturist elements that envision a liberatory future for Black people around the world. "We are contextualizing the opera by centering a radical Black imagination that embodies who Malcolm X was and what he means to us today," said O'Hara. "Imagining ourselves into the future is a powerful mechanism for dealing with our present. How can we maintain a sense of wonder while facing the brutality of American history and the legacy of X's life here on Earth?"

O'Hara is joined on the creative team by several Seattle Opera debuts: Associate Directors **Nicholas Polonio** and **Melanie Bacaling**, Set Designer **Clint Ramos**, Associate Set Designer **Diggle**, Costume Designer **Dede Ayite**, Assistant Costume Designer **Amanda Whidden**, Lighting Designer **Alex Jainchill**, Projection Designer **Yee Eun Nam**, and Choreographer **Rickey Tripp**. Returning are Sound Designer **Robertson Witmer** (*Das Rheingold* '23; *A Thousand Splendid Suns* '23) and Supplemental Wigs, Hair, and Makeup Designer **Ashlee Naegle** (*Alcina* '23; *Das Rheingold* '23).

On the podium is **conductor Kazem Abdullah**, who last appeared at Seattle Opera for the filmed version of *Tosca* ('21). Abdullah will lead members of the Seattle Symphony along with an improvising ensemble embedded within the orchestra, as called for in the score.

Making his debut in the titular role is **Kenneth Kellogg**, a bass who has quickly made a name for himself as an audience favorite in Seattle through his moving portrayal of The Father in *Blue* ('22) and his commanding appearance as Fafner in *Das Rheingold* ('23).

"It is ironic that Malcolm X, el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, has become an American icon," said Kellogg. "After all, his life's work was confronting America's hypocrisy. As Malcolm says in the opera: 'you want the truth, but you don't want to know.' There is a truth in his life that is undeniable, which I cannot wait to tell."

Kellogg is joined by other returning stars, including **Joshua Stewart** (The Son, *Blue* '22; Charlie Parker, *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* '20) as Elijah Mohammad/Street, **Joshua Conyers** (Policeman 3/Congregant 3, *Blue* '22) as Reginald, **Chad DeMaris** (Eduardo Jr./Mr. Xoloti, *Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World* '23) as Cop/Reporter 2, **Ibidunni Ojikutu** (Wife #2/Market Woman #2, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* '23) as the Neighbor/Ensemble, and **Ellaina Lewis** (Girlfriend 2/Congregant 2, *Blue* '22) in the Ensemble.

The rest of the cast are Seattle Opera debuts: **Leah Hawkins** as Louise/Betty, **Ronnita Miller** as Ella/Queen Mother, and **Allison Pohl** as Social Worker/Reporter 1. Debuts in the Ensemble are **Robert Mack** (also appearing as the Postman), **Richard L. Hodges** (also appearing as the Friend), **Brandon Coleman** (also appearing as the Garvey Preacher), **Olivia Johnson**, **Chantelle Grant**, **Elliott Paige**, **Nathan Rodriguez**, **Chase Taylor**, **Wayne Arthur**, and **Edwin Jhamaal Davis**.

Filling the role of Young Malcolm are two young local performers, **Rex Walker** and **Jace Johnson**, both of whom are students at Allegro Performing Arts Academy in Kent, Washington, and are making their Seattle Opera debuts.

Events for X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X

To celebrate the life of Malcolm X and foster ongoing conversations about his legacy, Seattle Opera has planned an extensive lineup of festivities and events throughout January, February, and March. In addition to the events listed below, the performances on Saturday, February 24 (opening night), and Wednesday, March 6, will feature special performances in the lobby during pre-show and intermission from local performing groups.

- **Malcolm X Arts & Writing Competition**

Submission deadline: January 22, at 11:59 PM

To encourage students to engage with Malcolm X's legacy, Seattle Opera is hosting a competition for high school juniors and seniors in Washington State. Students are invited to submit their essays, poems, and visual artwork responding to the prompt: "What aspect of Malcolm X's legacy has had the greatest impact on our society today?" The first-place winner in each category will be awarded \$500, and the first-place winners and first runners up will be invited to present their submissions before one of Seattle Opera's performances of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* at McCaw Hall. Further details and competition rules at

<https://www.seattleoperablog.com/2023/12/competition-announcement-malcolm-x-arts.html>.

- **X Cast Recital: "The Human Family"**

Three performances:

—Saturday, January 27, at 7:30 PM, Tagney Jones Hall at the Opera Center

—Saturday, February 10, at 1 PM, Federal Way Library (34200 1st Way S)

—Thursday, February 29, at 7 PM, Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute

This special recital features three cast members from *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*—Joshua Conyers (Reginald), Ibidunni Ojikutu (Neighbor/Ensemble), and Ellaina Lewis (Ensemble)—in a program exploring art song, opera arias, spirituals, and selections from the musical theatre tradition. More information at seattleopera.org/recital.

- **A Conversation with Tamara Payne**

Wednesday, February 7, at 7:30 PM, Town Hall Seattle

Presented in partnership with Town Hall Seattle, join author and researcher Tamara Payne for this conversation about *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X*, the biography she worked on with her father, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Les Payne, and finished following his untimely death in 2018. More information at seattleopera.org/performances-events/town-hall/.

- **Opera Talk: The Making of X**

Friday, February 23, at 7 PM, Tagney Jones Hall at the Opera Center

Learn how composer Anthony Davis, librettist Thulani Davis, and story writer Christopher Davis were inspired to adapt Malcolm X's life story for the opera stage in this conversation moderated by Seattle Opera Scholar-in-Residence Naomi André. Info and RSVP at seattleopera.org/performances-events/the-making-of-x/.

- **A Conversation with Ilyasah Shabazz**

Thursday, March 7, at 7 PM, Renton IKEA Performing Arts Center

In this special event co-hosted by the Northwest African American Museum and the King County Library System, Malcolm X's daughter Ilyasah Shabazz

will speak about her father's legacy and the work she has done in his memory. Info and RSVP at seattleopera.org/ilyasah-shabazz.

About Seattle Opera

Established in 1963, Seattle Opera is committed to serving the people of the Pacific Northwest through music, storytelling, and programs for people of all ages. Each year, more than 50,000 people attend the company's performances, and more than 100,000 people are served through school performances, radio broadcasts, and more. The organization brings opera to life in a number of different ways, offering artistic excellence through national and international collaborations. Seattle Opera strives to create an environment where artists, staff, behind-the-scenes workers, and members of the community feel a strong connection to the company, and to the art of opera. Follow Seattle Opera on Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and on Classical KING.

Performance Information

- Music by Anthony Davis, libretto by Thulani Davis, story by Christopher Davis
- Sung in English with English subtitles
- Run time approx. 3 hours 10 minutes with one intermission
- Tickets \$35–359

McCaw Hall (321 Mercer Street, Seattle, WA 98109)

Saturday, February 24, at 7:30 PM

Sunday, February 25, at 2:00 PM

Friday, March 1, at 7:30 PM

Sunday, March 3, at 2:00 PM

Wednesday, March 6, at 7:30 PM

Saturday, March 9, at 7:30 PM

Composer:	Anthony Davis†
Librettist:	Thulani Davis†
Story Author:	Christopher Davis†
Conductor:	Kazem Abdullah
Stage Director:	Robert O'Hara†
Associate Director:	Nicholas Poloniot†
Associate Director:	Melanie Bacaling†
Set Designer:	Clint Ramos†
Associate Set Designer:	Digglet†
Costume Designer:	Dede Ayite†
Assistant Costume Designer:	Amanda Whidden†
Lighting Designer:	Alex Jainchill†
Projection Designer:	Yee Eun Nam†

Choreographer:	Rickey Tripp†
Sound Designer:	Robertson Witmer
Supplemental Wigs, Hair, and Makeup Designer:	Ashlee Naegle
Malcolm:	Kenneth Kellogg
Elijah/Street:	Joshua Stewart
Louise/Betty:	Leah Hawkins†
Ella/Queen Mother:	Ronnita Millert†
Reginald:	Joshua Conyers
Young Malcolm:	Rex Walkert† (Feb. 24, Mar. 3 & 9) Jace Johnson† (Feb. 25, Mar. 1 & 6)
Social Worker/Reporter1:	Allison Pohl†
Cop/Reporter 2:	Chad DeMaris
Neighbor/Ensemble:	Ibidunni Ojikutu
Postman/Ensemble:	Robert Mack†
Friend/Ensemble:	Richard L. Hodgest†
Garvey Preacher/Ensemble:	Brandon Coleman†
Ensemble:	Ellaina Lewis Olivia Johnson† Chantelle Grant† Elliott Paige† Nathan Rodriguez† Chase Taylor† Wayne Arthurt† Edwin Jhamaal Davist†

†=Seattle Opera debut

Tickets and information at seattleopera.org/x.

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