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**Opera Omaha to premiere new opera
by Anthony Davis and poet Yusef Komunyakaa;
WAKONDA'S DREAM to be staged March 2007**

Omaha, Neb. – Opera Omaha's 2006-2007 Season will include popular favorites and a much-anticipated world premiere event. The company's 49th season opens with Puccini's *Tosca*, closes with Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and has, as its centerpiece, the world premiere of *Wakonda's Dream*, a new opera about the impact of history on a contemporary American Indian family.

Wakonda's Dream, which will be performed March 7, 9 and 11, 2007 at the historic Orpheum Theater in Omaha, Neb., is composed by the acclaimed and stylistically versatile **Anthony Davis** (*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, *Tanya*, *Amistad*), with a libretto by Louisiana-born poet **Yusef Komunyakaa**. The frequently honored Komunyakaa is the author of 12 books of poems and was, from 1999-2006, the Chancellor of the American Academy of Poets. He won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his book, *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems*.

Rhoda Levine will direct. Sets are by Peter Harrison, costumes by Paul Tazewell, and lighting by Stephen Strawbridge.

Wakonda's Dream is about an American Indian family today, impacted by historical events which occurred in Nebraska in 1879 that challenged the civil status of American Indians.

It is the story of a mother, Delores, a father, Justin, and a son, Jason, struggling to find their place as American Indians in contemporary society. Young Jason "sees things, feels things, knows things," which terrifies his mother. Proud of her heritage, Delores keeps the history of their people alive for her son. This only intensifies Jason's spiritual connection to the long-dead Ponca Chief Standing Bear, who, along with 13 fellow tribal members, was detained without cause for returning to Nebraska following the government removal of the tribe to "Indian Territory" (Oklahoma) in 1877.

With the help of volunteer lawyers, the Indians filed a writ of habeas corpus. In the ensuing trial the judge declared that "Indians are human beings under the law," and as such are entitled to rights of human beings, a status not previously granted Native Americans. The detention of Standing Bear was deemed by the judge, therefore, illegal.

In *Wakonda's Dream*, this history – which in many ways echoes aspects of our current national debate – is rendered throughout the opera as a backdrop to the evolving turbulence within the family. While Delores and Jason remain connected to tradition, Justin rejects his heritage. This leads to tragedy and, ultimately, redemption.

The evolution of the opera

As Anthony Davis was researching American Indian music and history, he attended the annual Ponca pow-wow in the Niobrara region of Nebraska. Among the thousands of attendees, he found himself one evening next to a woman, who, along with her son, became the inspiration for the characters of Delores and Jason. This woman told Davis that she lived on land where Standing Bear was buried, and that her then-five-year-old son sees and speaks to the spirit of the Ponca chief. In collaboration with Komunyakaa, the two evolved a drama in which Standing Bear serves as Jason's guide as the boy grows from childhood (in act 1) to adulthood (in act 2). The history of the removal of the Indians to Oklahoma and the subsequent internment and trial are revealed through this communion and through a choral reenactment of the famous trial.

- **Davis** says, "I didn't want to create a historical narrative or an account of the trial. That could be more easily accomplished in other media like television or film. In opera you have to find a way into the story. In this gifted child we found an artistic prism to look at history and not just present history. Having a character who can envision the past enables you to realize the past *in* the present. [In *Wakonda's Dream*] the past has a concrete effect on everyone in the opera." **Komunyakaa**, who was unable to attend the pow-wow with Davis, was, in his own words, "quite taken with the idea" of the visionary child, and "built the opera around that concept and process of discovery."

The opera's stage director, Rhoda Levine, suggested Komunyakaa as librettist. She had had experience working with him on a project through Northwestern University. The composer and poet immediately agreed to collaborate at an introductory meeting held in the offices of New York City Opera in December 2002. Komunyakaa knew of Anthony Davis' work before the meeting, and was intrigued by the potential partnership.

- Of his writing process for the project, Komunyakaa says, "I knew I wanted to stay very close to poetry in writing the libretto." He notes that his work "has always embraced aspects of

history as well as the imagination.” When he was invited to write a libretto that included the history of the Standing Bear trial, he was amazed by the fact that American Indians in the late 1870s were not thought of as human beings, were denied property ownership and couldn’t appear in a court of law.

Rhoda **Levine**, who was also brought on as creative consultant during the development of the project, also previously worked with Davis. Among her credits, she served in the same capacity as both director and dramaturge with Davis on *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* when it premiered at New York City Opera in 1986. About her role throughout the development of *Wakonda’s Dream*, Levine frequently refers to herself as the “audience advocate,” a term she prefers to dramaturge.

- Levine describes the role of history in the story: “If one denies ones past, ones future is in some way impaired because your past informs your sense of the future. If you deny your roots, you lose a sense of your own identity. If one feels punished not by what they do but because of who they are – which is how Justin feels in our story – there is a sense of disconnect. He wants nothing to do with his native past. He feels it has limited his opportunities. But our past will always enrich who we are. That is the theme of *Wakonda’s Dream*, and it is a universal theme.”

The music

Upon hearing *Wakonda’s Dream*, those familiar with *X* or other Davis works will be surprised by his inclusion of real “songs.” Listeners will also hear blues, jazz and gospel, and well as underlying Native American rhythms, as interpreted by the composer.

- Anthony Davis describes the score for *Wakonda’s Dream* in this way: “Generally, what I’m doing is a synthesis. I have created something new from many diverse sources. My background draws on the African American tradition, jazz particularly. I developed my own voice as an opera composer that hopefully is not imitative or derivative. My work has a rhythmic quality to it, with rhythmic structure as its foundation. Even in my choral writing, the choir is like a drum.”

Vision for the production

Levine describes the stage setting as “very simple. The action takes place on a raked surface surrounded by the chorus and a company of American Indian dancers. They are on stage throughout the entire performance, like spirits.”

Set designer, **Peter Harrison**, says, “The scenic design for *Wakonda’s Dream* approaches the piece on several levels to reflect the psychological and spiritual realities which co-exist musically and in the libretto.

“The unmoored world of Justin and his family is a floating raked earthen plain, littered with the detritus of contemporary Native American existence – nature that has been drained of the life and

fertility it once held for native people – and filled with the trash of civilization: a broken motorcycle, old tires, crates, abandoned rusty oil drum, etc.”

He continues, “The plain is also, on another level, the place where past ancestors have seen the Spirit of the earth, danced their shaman dances, and buried their dead to find a peace the modern world begrudges them.”

Establishing the atmosphere / building a “soundscape”

The world of the opera goes beyond the visual. To further establish the atmosphere, Davis has involved well-known electronic sound designer, Earl Howard, to create a synthesized soundscape as one enters the theater.

- Prior to the action beginning on stage, the audience – from the time they enter the theater – will be enveloped in “the sound environment of woods and nature. As the prelude eventually begins, synthesized sounds will transform and become more musical.” Gradually, the audience will “recognize choral voices taking over and *becoming* the sound of the wind. Earl’s and my idea is that sound design can be completely integrated into the music with no clear division. What was previously thought of as sound effects becomes musical.”

This experience will be reprised during the opera’s postlude, which returns to the same time and place as the prelude.

- Davis says “a lot of theater is fixed on the old fashioned notion of sound design or sound effects.” He understands “that the sound world is really synthesized with music. I’ve worked with Earl before, but this is first time we’ve specifically integrated sound and music.”
- He finds this work “very different” from spectral composers who employ movement of sound, or works like John Adams’ *El Niño*. “Both Earl and I are improvisers who understand that sound, melody and rhythm can be integrated into a coherent whole with form and meaning.” Davis summarizes the dramatic importance of such a blending. “The audioscape of the woods metamorphoses into something more abstract. It’s not about a man in a soundscape. It’s about what he is thinking and feeling. This is a much more a supernatural place transformed by the character’s mind.”

Eugene Perry sings the part of Justin; his wife Delores is sung by **Phyllis Pancella**. Chief Standing Bear is sung by **Arnold Rawls**. Emerging tenor Will Ferguson sings the grown Jason. Soprano **Mara Bonde** and bass-baritone **Kristopher Irmiter**, as a white daughter and father intimate with the family, round out the cast.

Wakonda’s Dream was commissioned by Opera Omaha with support from The Opera Fund, a program of OPERA America, Roberta Buffett Bialek, Carol and David Domina, The Argosy Foundation Contemporary Music Fund, Robert Ellis and Jane Bernstein, and Meet the Composer Commissioning Music USA.

Wakonda's Dream Festival

In advance of the Opera Omaha's world premiere production, Opera Omaha will present free programs in schools and the community featuring the music and poetry of *Wakonda's Dream* creators, composer Anthony Davis and librettist Yusef Komunyakaa. Included are musical events, as meet-the-creators panel discussion, poetry readings and an American Indian art museum program. Of special interest is an evening of Davis's jazz compositions, a poetry reading with Komunyakaa and 2004-2006 U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser, a slide lecture with Richard West, director of the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian, and a concert performance of *Restless Mourning*. Written by Davis, *Restless Mourning* is a memorial to 9/11, commissioned by Spoleto USA.

WAKONDA'S DREAM

World Premiere Production

Composer: Anthony Davis / Librettist: Yusef Komunyakaa
March 7 and 9 at 7:30 p.m. and March 11 at 2 p.m., 2007
Orpheum Theater, Slosburg Hall, 409 S. 16th St., Omaha, Neb.

Conductor: **Stewart Robertson ***

Director: **Rhoda Levine**

Soundscape Designer: **Earl Howard**

Set Design: **Peter Harrison**

Costume Design: **Paul Tazewell**

Lighting Design: **Stephen Strawbridge**

Production Sponsor: **ConAgra Foods**

Cast

Eugene Perry, baritone: Justin Labelle

Phyllis Pancella, mezzo-soprano: Delores Labelle

William Ferguson, tenor: Jason Labelle

Arnold Rawls, tenor: Chief Standing Bear

Mara Bonde, *soprano*: Laura Arlington

Kristopher Irmiter, *bass-baritone*: Arlington

* *Wakonda's Dream* will be one of three world premieres led by Opera Omaha Artistic Director Stewart Robertson during 2006-2007. First will be the Stephen Hartke / Philip Littell premiere at Glimmerglass Opera in summer 2006, *The Greater Good*. Second is *Wakonda's Dream* for Opera Omaha in March 2007. Third is *Anna Karenina* by David Carlson / Colin Graham in April / May 2007.