

Elmer Gantry, a new American opera
Premieres in Montclair, NJ on Wednesday, January 23rd, 2008
After a hugely successful Nashville Opera premiere in November.

A Co-production between Peak Performances @ Montclair and the Nashville Opera

The world premiere production of ELMER GANTRY, a new American opera by composer Robert Aldridge and librettist Herschel Garfein will open Wednesday, January 23rd, 2008 as part of Peak Performances @ Montclair. Performances take place in the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. The Nashville Opera run of ELMER GANTRY was an unprecedented critical and audience success; in the month since its premiere, ELMER GANTRY has already been scheduled by two other US opera companies.

This “distinctly American*¹” opera brings to the stage the moving and powerful story of the womanizing preacher Gantry and the beautiful traveling evangelist, Sharon Falconer, with whom he falls in love. Based on the novel by Sinclair Lewis (which was also the basis for the 1960 movie) and set in the milieu of early twentieth century revivalism, the opera presents a humorous and poignant drama of faith and faithlessness “well-timed*²” for an election year in which religion has emerged as a key issue. Brave and compelling music is at the heart of this stunning production: gospel, country, Appalachian folk song, brass band music and original hymns are all reflected within Aldridge’s “kinetic, vividly scored*³” music “steeped in American vernacular idiom*⁴”. The Nashville Scene raved, “*Who’s The Man*, arranged for male chorus, proves to be such a life-affirming, foot-stomping romp that it could probably win converts at an actual revival meeting.” As the Nashville Tennessean wrote in its review: “Aldridge and Garfein... capture the essence of the American religious experience.”

Robert Aldridge and Herschel Garfein carefully researched their subject matter, making visits to small church services and tent revivals in North Carolina to get the full experience necessary to undertake this important work. Although each has a long history of theatrical work, this collaboration “became much more to us than just the viable stage vehicle we first imagined” Herschel says. “For one thing, it’s hard to imagine that any two collaborators have ever had more sheer fun than we did in writing *Elmer Gantry*.”

ELMER GANTRY features a first-rate cast of exciting young American singers. Baritone Keith Phares as Elmer Gantry, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Rivera as Sharon Falconer, tenor Frank Kelley as Eddie Fislinger, tenor William Ferguson as Frank Shallard, and soprano Malinda Haslett as Lulu.

¹ The Tennessean, Nashville, November 17, 2007

² Opera News, November 2007

³ A. Tommasini, The New York Times, May 15, 2007

⁴ *Ibid.*

Keith Phares (“simply amazing” -- the Nashville Scene) makes his Houston Grand Opera debut this season under the direction of Patrick Summers in the world premiere of Jake Heggie’s *Last Acts*, singing opposite Frederica von Stade. He makes a role debut as Sharpless in *Madama Butterfly* with Opera Ontario and returns to the stage of the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in a new production of Martín y Soler’s *Una Cosa Rara*.

Jennifer Rivera (“uses her earthy mezzo-soprano to powerfully communicate her character’s mix of piety and personal romantic conflict*⁵”) has been heard in many roles with New York City Opera, such as Cherubino in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Lazuli in Chabrier’s *L’Etoile*, Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel*, and Mhryne in *Lysistrata*. Her performances at City Opera have garnered her praise from the New York Times, who stated that she sang “marvelously” with “richness, ease, and exactness” (*L’Etoile*) and that she was “again delightful as the Stage Boy – all flailing limbs, and fresh, ready singing” (*Hansel*).

Frank Kelley as Elmer’s nemesis, Eddie Fislinger “almost steals the show with his... arias filled with reflective pathos, self-loathing and vengeance.*⁶” Mr. Kelley’s recent recordings include three Deutsche Harmonia Mundi CD’s with the ensemble Sequentia: “Aquitania”, “Shining Light”, and “Saints”; a Teldec release of Stravinsky’s *Renard* with Hugh Wolff and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra; and Kurt Weill’s *Das Kleine Mahagonny* with Kent Nagano, available on London videotape and on CD from Erato.

Tenor William Ferguson takes over the role of Frank Shallard for the Montclair performances. At the Metropolitan Opera, he has performed in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *The Magic Flute* (under the baton of James Levine), and has sung Beppe in *I Pagliacci*. He made his Santa Fe Opera debut as Caliban in the North American premiere of Thomas Adès’ *The Tempest*. In 2005, he bowed in Sydney with Opera Australia singing Truffaldino in a new production of *The Love for Three Oranges* directed by Francesca Zambello and conducted by Richard Hickox (also released as a Chandos compact disc).

Soprano Malinda Haslett (“a charmer... with a gorgeous soprano*⁷”) reprises her role of Lulu. Recently, she has appeared in two of her signature roles: Nannetta in *Falstaff* with Le Grand Théâtre de Limoges and Le Grand Théâtre de Reims; and Juliette in *Roméo et Juliette* with Nashville Opera. She has been hailed in Paris and Brussels by *Le Soir* for “a Violetta... of elegance, grandeur and refined power.”

For more information on ELMER GANTRY and the Montclair, NJ Peak Performances Premiere, please contact Dawn Kamerling at The Press House: 718.302.1522 or dawn@thepresshouse.com.

⁵ The Nashville Scene, November 22, 2007

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*