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Houston Grand Opera Presents World Premiere of *The House without a Christmas Tree* Family-friendly holiday opera November 30–December 17 at George R. Brown Convention Center

Houston, November 7, 2017— **Houston Grand Opera (HGO)** continues its series of holiday operas with the world premiere presentation of *The House without a Christmas Tree* by the widely admired composer/librettist team of **Ricky Ian Gordon** and **Royce Vavrek**, in the HGO Resilience Theater at the George R. Brown Convention Center. The opera is based on the uplifting story by Gail Rock and the beloved 1972 television film of the same name about a family that is healed by the holiday spirit. A precocious daughter struggles to understand her father’s resentment of the holidays and longs for a beautiful Christmas tree like other families have, to “make her house look happy.” The opera includes a new setting of the carol “Gather Around the Christmas Tree,” sung by a juvenile chorus. Tickets for the new venue are available at HGO.org. Group discounts are available. Parking for HGO’s performances will be available at the Avenida North garage located at 1815 Rusk Street, across from HGO’s new venue. A sky bridge connects the parking garage to the GRB, and there is clear signage directing patrons to the theater. More information about parking can be found [here](#).

Several HGO Studio alumni lead the cast: soprano **Lauren Snouffer** stars as young Addie Mills, baritone **Daniel Belcher** plays her father, and soprano **Heidi Stober** (now singing Cleopatra in *Julius Caesar*) takes the roles of the adult Adelaide Mills, her mother, Helen, and Addie’s teacher, Miss Thompson. Soprano **Patricia Schuman** sings Grandma Mills, and the role of Carla Mae will be taken by HGO Studio alumna **Megan Mikailovna Samarin** (now playing Sextus in *Julius Caesar*). Young tenor **Maximillian Macias** will sing Billy Wild, and soprano **Elisabeth Leone** will sing

Gloria Cott. James Robinson, whose long collaboration with HGO includes the current production of *Julius Caesar*, will direct and HGO Associate Music Director **Bradley Moore** will conduct. Sung in English with projected text.

The House without a Christmas Tree is the third opera for HGO by Ricky Ian Gordon and the second by Royce Vavrek. This is their first collaboration after their critically acclaimed opera *27*, premiered by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2014.

Ricky Ian Gordon's two previous operas for HGO are *A Coffin in Egypt*, written for Frederica von Stade (2014, with libretto by Leonard Foglia, also performed at The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Opera Philadelphia, Chicago Opera Theatre, and Lincoln Center), and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1996, with Jean Claude van Itallie). Gordon's catalog also includes *Morning Star* (libretto by William Hoffman) for the Cincinnati Opera, with a new version set to premiere in March 2018 for On Site Opera; *27* (libretto by Royce Vavrek) for Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and also performed in a new choral version commissioned by Master Voices at City Center in New York; *Rappahannock County* (libretto by Mark Campbell), for the Harrison Opera House; *Sycamore Trees* (libretto by composer) for The Signature Theatre; *The Grapes of Wrath* (libretto by Michael Korie), premiered by the Minnesota Opera in 2007 and a new version premiered by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2017; *Green Sneakers: for Baritone, String Quartet, and Empty Chair* (libretto by the composer), a theatrical song cycle premiered by the Miami String Quartet; the song cycle *Orpheus and Euridice* for Lincoln Center; *My Life with Albertine* (with Richard Nelson), for Playwright's Horizons; *Night Flight to San Francisco* and *Antarctica* (for Renée Fleming), both set to text from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*; *Dream True* (with Tina Landau) for the Vineyard Theatre; *States of Independence* (also with Landau) for the American Music Theatre Festival; and *Only Heaven* for Encompass Opera.

Royce Vavrek is a Grande Prairie, Canada-born, Brooklyn-based librettist and lyricist whose opera *Angel's Bone* with composer Du Yun was awarded the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Music. He made his HGO debut in 2015 with HGO's world premiere of *O Columbia* (composer Gregory Spears). He is also known for his diverse collaborations with composers Ricky Ian Gordon (*27*), David T. Little (*Dog Days, Am I Born, JFK*); Missy Mazzoli (*Song from the Uproar, Breaking the Waves*); Joshua Schmidt (*Midwestern Gothic*); Paola Prestini (*Yoani, The Hubble Cantata*); Matt Marks (*A Song for Wade [This is Not That Song]*); *Strip Mall*), Ellen Reid (*Knoxville: Summer of 2015*); Mikael Karlsson (*Diana Vreeland*); and Marisa Michelson (*Naamah's Ark*). Vavrek is co-artistic director of The Coterie, an opera-theater company founded with Tony-nominated soprano Lauren Worsham. The company is currently developing a series of short films that will operatically adapt Aaron Teel's novella-in-flash *Shampoo Horns* into six installments, each composed by a different composer, a project supported by the Canada Council for the Arts' New Chapter program. He holds a BFA in filmmaking and creative writing

from Concordia University, Montreal, and an MFA from the Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program at New York University. He is an alumnus of American Lyric Theater's Composer Librettist Development Program.

HGO has transformed an exhibit hall in the convention center into an intimate theater after being displaced from its creative home at the Wortham Theater Center by Hurricane Harvey. Every seat is less than 100 feet from the stage and the productions give audiences insight into and connection to the theatrical process, in what HGO is calling "unconventional opera."

Critics have been impressed with the results. Of the opening performance of *La traviata*, the *New York Times* noted, "Albina Shagimuratova, as Violetta, sounded very fine indeed, with alluring tone and admirable clarity and accuracy." The *Houston Press* wrote, about *Julius Caesar*, "HGO knocked it out of the park."

* *Company debut*

Former HGO Studio artist

World Premiere

The House without a Christmas Tree

A Chamber Opera in One Act

Based on *The House without a Christmas Tree*, a book by Gail Rock

Music by Ricky Ian Gordon; Libretto by Royce Vavrek

Sung in English with projected English text

November 30, Dec. 2, 3m, 6, 8, 10m, 14, 16m, 17m, 2017

Addie Mills

Lauren Snouffer #

James Addison Mills III ("Dad") Daniel Belcher #

Miss Thompson/ Heidi Stober #

Helen Mills/

Adelaide Mills

Grandma Mills

Patricia Schuman

Carla Mae

Megan Mikailovna Samarin #

Billy Wild

Maximillian Macias *

Gloria Cott

Elisabeth Leone *

Conductor

Bradley Moore

Director

James Robinson

Set Designer

Allen Moyer

Costume Designer

James Schuette

Lighting Designer

Christopher Akerlind

Sound Designer

Andrew Harper

Juvenile Chorus Director

Karen Reeves

Houston Grand Opera Orchestra and Juvenile Chorus

Commissioned and produced by Houston Grand Opera

Production funding from The Robert and Janice McNair Foundation, The Cullen Trust for the Performing Arts, The Cullen Foundation

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About Houston Grand Opera

Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is one of the largest, most innovative, and most highly acclaimed opera companies in the United States. HGO was the only American finalist for Opera Company of the Year at the 2017 International Opera Awards. In fulfilling its mission to advance the operatic art to serve an ever-evolving audience, HGO has led the field in commissioning new works (63 world premieres to date) and in training and nurturing promising young artists and administrators. The company contributes to the cultural enrichment of Houston and the nation through a diverse and innovative program of performances, community events, and education projects that reaches the widest possible public. HGO's pioneering community engagement initiative, HGOco, has served as a model for other arts organizations.

The NEXUS Initiative is HGO's multi-year ticket underwriting program that allows Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy opera without the barrier of price. Since 2007, NEXUS has enabled more than 250,000 Houstonians to experience superlative opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

HGO has toured extensively and has won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards. It is the only opera company to win all three honors.

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