

## Houston Grand Opera presents web-only opera series based on true stories of star-crossed love

### Pilot episode to be released online April 20

Houston, March 19, 2018—Houston Grand Opera (HGO) invites audiences to explore 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera viewing with *Star Cross'd*, a new streaming series of short opera films based on true personal experiences with *Romeo and Juliet* themes. Each episode will include a line from Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*. The series's pilot, "Boundless," will be released online at [HGO.org](http://HGO.org) on April 20 to coincide with the opening of HGO's new production of Bernstein's *West Side Story* (also based on *Romeo and Juliet*). "Boundless" tells the story of Alma, a middle-aged woman who seeks personal fulfillment at a crossroads in her life and begins a relationship with Luc, an artistic soul 16 years her junior. When a shadow looms over their happy ending, Alma guides her lover to his destiny. The plot is based on a true story by Houston resident **Aryana Rose**, who originally shared it at a storytelling event held by *The Moth*. The story went on to become one of the most viewed on the *Moth's* Facebook page.

The composer for the *Star Cross'd* series is **Avner Dorman**; the librettist is **Stephanie Fleischmann**. The "Boundless" episode will be filmed at locations around Houston March 19–21 and produced by Junction Road Films, a North Carolina-based video production company. The Houston-based cast includes **Cecilia Duarte** as Alma, **Mark Thomas** as Luc, and **Alexandra Smither** as Sophie.

*Star-cross'd* is a production of HGOco, the company's education and community engagement initiative. "This series explores *Romeo and Juliet*-themed stories through a contemporary lens," says HGOco director **Carleen Graham**. "With online-only series trending, we hope that *Star-cross'd* will offer stories and a viewing platform that speak to younger viewers about opera in a fresh way."

HGOco has begun a search for the next three episodes. Interested writers with a compelling tale to tell are invited to record their stories that include a line from *Romeo and Juliet*, upload them to YouTube or SoundCloud, and send the link to [starcrossd@hgo.org](mailto:starcrossd@hgo.org) or use the hashtag #HGOSTarCrossd. Stories will be adapted into 15-minute opera webisodes. Submissions will be

accepted on a rolling basis. For more information, please visit our website at [houstongrandopera.org/star-crossd](http://houstongrandopera.org/star-crossd).

*Star-cross'd* is made possible through generous support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Glen Rosenbaum.

**AVNER DORMAN** A native of Israel now living in the United States, Dorman draws on a variety of cultural and historical influences in composing music in orchestral, chamber, and solo settings. His first opera, *Wahnfried*, premiered in 2017 at the Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe. His mandolin concerto was performed by the Atlanta Symphony (2016) and the Israel Philharmonic, Sydney Symphony, Winnipeg Symphony, and the Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (2017). Dorman is the current music director of CityMusic Cleveland Chamber Orchestra. He holds a doctorate in composition from the Juilliard School and serves as Associate Professor of Music Theory and Composition at the Sunderman Conservatory of Music at Gettysburg College.

**STEPHANIE FLEISCHMANN** wrote the libretto for HGOco's world premiere of *After the Storm* (2016), composed by David Hanlon. Works by the librettist-playwright have been performed internationally and across the United States. Opera libretti include *The Long Walk*, with Jeremy Howard Beck, commissioned by American Lyric Theater; *In a Grove*, with Chris Cerrone; *The Property*, commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago. Upcoming projects include new operas with Peter Knell and Julia Adolphe. Music-theater works include *Niagara*, with Bobby Previte and Daniel Fish (Hudson Opera House); *Red Fly/Blue Bottle* and *The Secret Lives of Coats*, both composed by Christina Campanella; and *The Sweetest Life*, with Saskia Lane and Julian Crouch.

Lyrics/dramaturgy: *The Greeks and The Americans* (Juilliard). Her work for theater has been performed and developed in venues including the Exit Festival (France), Roundhouse Studio (London), Synchronicity (Atlanta), Son of Semele (L.A.), Roadworks (Chicago), Act II (Philadelphia), Asolo Rep (Sarasota), and in New York City at New Georges, Soho Rep, Mabou Mines SUITE, Knitting Factory, and the Public. She is working on projects for Sound House and New Georges in New York for 2018.

**CECILIA DUARTE (Alma)** created the role of Renata in *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*, premiered by Houston Grand Opera in 2010. The mezzo-soprano has toured with *Cruzar* to Paris, France; Lyric Opera of Chicago; San Diego Opera; Arizona Opera; Fort Worth Opera; and most recently, New York City Opera. She will reprise the role at HGO this May. She has been active in the circle of contemporary music, giving life to new roles such as Gracie in *A Way Home* (HGOco world premiere, 2010), Jessie Lydell in *A Coffin in Egypt* (HGO world premiere, 2014), First responder/Harriet in *After the Storm* (HGOco world premiere, 2016), Alicia in *Some Light Emerges* (HGOco world premiere, 2017), as well as chamber pieces. She can be heard in the most recent CD recording of Daniel Catán songs, *Encantamiento*. An early music enthusiast, Duarte sings often with Ars Lyrica Houston, Merury Houston, the Bach Society Houston, the Festivalensemble in Stuttgart, Germany, and the Festival de Musica Barroca de San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Other opera roles include Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, Sarelda in *The Inspector*, Tituba in *The Crucible*, Loma Williams in *Cold Sassy Tree*, and others. Duarte is also an active jazz singer.

**MARK THOMAS** (Luc) is a native Texan. The lyric tenor made his HGO debut as Isaiah in the HGOco world premiere of David Hanlon and Stephanie Fleischmann's *After the Storm*, sang Younger Thompson in HGOco's presentation of *Glory Denied* earlier this season, and participated in HGO's workshop of Carlisle Floyd's *Prince of Players*. He won the Houston district competition of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, received a master of music degree in vocal performance from the University of Houston, and sang the roles of Des Grieux in Massenet's *Manon*, Ruggero in Puccini's *La rondine*, Konstantin Levin in David Carlson's *Anna Karenina*, and Roméo in Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* with the Moores Opera Center. He has also performed with Des Moines Metro Opera as an apprentice artist and HGOco's touring program, Opera to Go! He will return to Des Moines Metro Opera this summer as a 2018 apprentice artist.

**ALEXANDRA SMITHER (Sophie)**, named one of CBC's 2017 "30 Hot Musicians Under 30," made her HGO debut as Younger Alyce in HGOco's presentation of *Glory Denied* earlier this season and will sing Diana in *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna* in May. The Canadian soprano's other roles include Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel* (Rice University), Mrs. Waters in *The Boatswain's Mate* (Opera5), and Esmeralda in *The Bartered Bride* and Lydia in *Second Nature*, both with Music Academy of the West. She swept all top prizes in Canada's 2017 Eckhardt-Gramatée Competition and subsequently toured her prize-winning recital of contemporary works across Canada. As a soprano fellow, she made her Tanglewood Music Festival debut alongside Emanuel Ax in June 2017 for a performance of Schubert's "Der Hirt auf dem Felsen." She returns as a fellow again in 2018; performances will include the premiere of a new piece for soprano and wind dectet by Theo Chandler. She has also sung with acclaimed early-music ensembles Ars Lyrica and Emmanuel Music. In 2018, she performs at the Banff Centre; with Melbourne Metropolis Festival and Vancouver's Music in the Morning; and in a recital tour of Japan and the inaugural tour of PushBack Collective with bassoonist Ben Roidl-Ward.

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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 (65 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 three Emmy awards. It is the only opera company to win all three honors.

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**Media Contact:** Melissa Arredondo, melissa@elmorepr.com, 713-524-0661

**Director of Communications:** Judith Kurnick, jkurnick@hgo.org 713-546-0240

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