

Opera Las Vegas



Approaching Ali

Music by D.J. Sparr

Libretto by Mark Campbell and Davis Miller

Based on My Dinner with Ali and The Tao of Muhammad Ali by Davis
Miller

Presented by special arrangement with Bill Holab Music

Saturday, 18 March 7:30 pm

Sunday, 19 March 3:00 pm

Nicholas J. Horn Theatre, College of Southern Nevada

Las Vegas, NV

This performance is 1 hour long and is performed with no intermission
There will be a talkback with the creative team following the performance.

Welcome Letter from our General Director, Jim Sohre



It is a pleasure to “finally” welcome you to the West Coast Premiere of D.J. Sparr, Mark Campbell and Davis Miller’s engaging one act opera, *Approaching Ali*! Having twice been re-scheduled owing to the realities of the pandemic, It is a pleasure to be presenting this joyous story at last.

We hope you’ll agree that it is a knockout of a true story, based on David Miller’s best-selling book, *The Tao of Muhammad Ali*. We are thrilled to be presenting this production starring Metropolitan Opera bass Soloman Howard as the legendary boxer, a role he originated in the World Premiere at Washington National Opera.

Appearing alongside him as Davis Miller is OLV favorite baritone (and Las Vegas native) Brian James Myer. Another popular local vocalist, soprano Sheronda McKee-Dollar assumes the role of Ali’s mother, Odessa Clay. OLV is also proud to present two outstanding artists making their company debuts, tenor Sebastian Haboczki and mezzo-soprano Jennifer Matthews, as Davis’ parents, Roy and Sara Miller.

The icing on the artistic cake is that two young men will be making their operatic solo debuts sharing the role of Young Davis: Mel Ibrahim and Trenton Mellon. These two middle school students are holding their own with all these pros and may just score a TKO!

Approaching Ali is being presented as part of Opera Las Vegas’ award-winning Living Composers and Librettists Initiative, which has received three consecutive grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Our Twenty-fourth Anniversary Season concludes with Giuseppe Verdi’s immortal classic, *La Traviata*, with performances on 9 and 11 June at the Judy Bayley Theatre, on the University of Nevada Las Vegas campus. We hope to see you there. But for now, thanks for being here, and we hope you enjoy *Approaching Ali*.

Best,

Jim Sohre, General Director

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jim Sohre". The signature is fluid and stylized, with several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Cast & Company

Approaching Ali

Music by D.J. Sparr

Libretto by Mark Campbell and Davis Miller

Time: The story jumps around in time between 1964 and 1989

Place: Louisville, Kentucky

Running Time: 1 hour with no intermission

The text included in the projections is taken from "The Tao of Muhammad

Ali: The Man, The Legend" by Davis Miller.

Davis Miller: Brian James Myer

Muhammad Ali: Soloman Howard

Odessa Clay: Sheronda McKee-Dollar

Roy Miller: Sebastian Haboczki

Sara Miller: Jennifer Mathews

Young Davis: Mel Ibrahim (18 March)

Trenton Mellen (19 March)

Creative

Conductor: Joshua Horsch

Director: Marc Callahan

Production Pianist: Deborah Gordillo

Stage Manager: Rebecca Sass

Costume Coordinator and Designer: Abby Stroot

Lighting and Projections Designer: Catherine M. Pratt

Cast & Company

Orchestra Featuring Members of the Las Vegas Philharmonic

Violin I

Naoko Taniguchi, Concert Master

Violin II

Svetlin Belneev

Viola

Ian Long

Cello

Moonlight Tran

Bass

Paul Firak

Flute/Piccolo

Bonnie Buhler-Tanouye

Clarinet/Bass Clarinet

Jonathan Cannon

Percussion

Robert Bonora

Manny Gamazo

Keyboard

Deborah Gordillo

Our Heartfelt Thanks

Opera Las Vegas is indebted to
Chris and Anita Murray
for major funding support

These dear friends and generous supporters
Were be honored for their invaluable service
At a National Trustees Awards Dinner produced by
Opera America, the National Center in
New York City on 21 October 2022.
Congratulations, Chris and Anita, we wouldn't be here without you!

Special Gratitude to Our Wonderful Artist Home Hosts

Bob and Shirley Kramer
Julie and Sal Longo
Chris and Anita Murray

Our Heartfelt Thanks

We are deeply grateful to the Las Vegas Philharmonic for being such wonderful collaborators during the 2022-2023 season and beyond!

With additional special thanks to our valued friends:

Richard Brusky Photography
Las Vegas Little Theatre
Ginny Adams
Gillen Brey
Southern Nevada Music
UNLV Department of Dance
Sandra de Borger
Horn Theatre, CSN Staff and Crew
William Schroder

Summary

D.J. Sparr, Mark Campbell and Davis Miller's **Approaching Ali** was inspired by the latter's deeply personal story, *My Dinner with Ali*, and the subsequent international best seller, *The Tao of Muhammad Ali*.

The poignant tale recounts how a bullied young boy (Miller) in North Carolina in the early 1960's is galvanized to overcome some traumatic childhood events when he sees the charismatic and powerful icon, Muhammad Ali on television. Young Miller follows his idol faithfully, continuing to draw inspiration from him. More than twenty years later, as a writer on the brink of middle age, he seeks to rekindle that spirit of awe and gratitude, by visiting his boyhood hero in person at Ali's mother's home in Louisville, Kentucky.

Miller drives around indecisively, then steels his resolve, parks the car, nervously walks to the front door, and rings the bell. A lifelong friendship is born. *Approaching Ali* is sure to warm hearts with an uplifting message of brotherly accord.

Biographies



Muhammad Ali: Soloman Howard

Winner of the Kennedy Center's 2019 Marian Anderson Vocal Award, Soloman Howard is a graduate of Washington National Opera's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program and garners high praise from the press for his vivid performances on the great opera and concert stages of the world. Soloman Howard's voice is described as "sonorous" by [The New York Times](#), "superhuman" by [The Denver Post](#), and "a triumph" by [The Guardian](#).

Soloman Howard joins San Francisco Opera in the 2021-22 season for no less than three productions: *Tosca*, *Fidelio*, and *Don Giovanni*. He appears with English National Opera in the role of The Commander in Poul Ruder's *The Handmaid's Tale* in a new production directed by the Artistic Director Annilese Miskimmon, bows as Colline in *La bohème* at the Teatro Real in a production by Richard Jones conducted by Nicola Luisotti, and reprises the title role of *Approaching Ali*, by composer D.J. Sparr and librettists Mark Campbell and Davis Miller with Opera Las Vegas. Concert appearances of the season include Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with Music Director Fabio Luisi and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra as well as with Jakub Hruša leading The Philharmonia and an all-Verdi Gala Concert at San Francisco Opera under the baton of Music Director Eun Sun Kim.

Biographies

Davis Miller: Brian James Myer



Baritone Brian James Myer has been praised as a stage animal of "both voice and character to make him stand out in the crowd" (Sarasota Observer). In the spring of 2021, Mr. Myer returned to New York City Opera as Alberto in their workshop of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (Gordon/Korie) and in 2022, he reprised the role in the opera's world premiere (a recording of the opera will also take place in 2023). Later in 2022, he joined the roster of The Metropolitan Opera as the cover of

Marcellus/Player 4 in Brett Dean's *Hamlet*, made his Opera Delaware and Baltimore Concert Opera debuts as the title character in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and joined the Bard Symphony Orchestra as Second Nazarene in *Salome*. Upcoming engagements include Mr. Myer making his debut with Berkshire Opera Festival debut as Masetto in *Don Giovanni*, covering Morbio in Strauss' *Die Schweigsame Frau* with Bard Summerscape, joining Brooklyn Art Song Society for selections by Ivor Gurney and Gerald Finzi, returning to Opera Orlando as Papageno in *Die Zauberflöte*, rejoins Opera Las Vegas as David Miller in *Approaching Ali*, joining Symphony San Jose as the baritone soloist in *Carmina Burana*, and debuting the role of Count Almaviva with Tri-Cities Opera and Syracuse Opera.

Biographies



Odessa Clay: Sheronda McKee

Dr. Sheronda McKee, soprano, originally from Phoenix, Arizona has been appearing on stages in both the United States and Europe. Recently she finished her Doctor of Musical Arts at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas under the guidance of Dr. Alfonse Anderson. She is currently performing with Opera Las Vegas and Opera On Tap Las Vegas. Most recent roles performed with UNLV Opera include Countess Almaviva (*Le nozze di Figaro*) and Ariadne (*Ariadne auf Naxos*). She has also performed the title role in Puccini's "*Suor Angelica*" for the International Lyric Academy during the Tuscia Opera Festival. In concert and in scenes she has played Violetta (*La Traviata*), Nedda (*I Pagliacci*), Lucia (*Lucia di Lammermoor*) and others.

Sheronda has been a featured soloist in Handel's *Messiah* as well as Mozart's *Requiem*. She has traveled to Viterbo and Tarquinia in Italy with the International Lyric Academy and Graz, with the AIMS Program (American Institute of Musical Studies) where she was an alternate in the 2010 Meistersinger Vocal Competition. Recent awards include the Pasadena Opera Guild Scholarship, the Encouragement Award from MONC (Metropolitan Opera National Council) as well as First place in NATS (National Association of Teachers of Singing). She most recently appeared with Opera Las Vegas in *Opera Legends in Black*.

Biographies



Roy Miller: Sebastian Haboczki

Dr. Sebastian Haboczki currently serves as Adjunct Professor of Voice at the University of Mary and as the Music Director of Corpus Christi Catholic Church, in Bismarck, ND. Dr. Haboczki has earned critical acclaim as a young tenor with “a rich vibrant voice and an exuberant amount of energy,” in Canada, Europe, and the United States. In 2012, he made his debut at Amsterdam’s Het Concertgebouw as a Studio Artist with Opera Netherlands.

During his time in the Atelier lyrique young artist program at Opéra de Montréal, Dr. Haboczki was featured on the main stage as Scott Fitzgerald in *27*, Ring Announcer in the Canadian debut of *Champion*, Tybalt in *Roméo et Juliette*, and Reporter in *JFK*. Other roles include Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, Alfredo in *La Traviata*, Almaviva in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Ferrando in *Così fan tutte*, Ulisse in *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*, Brighella in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Nerone in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, Alfred in *Die Fledermaus*, Nemorino in *L’elisir d’amore*, Bénédict in *Béatrice et Bénédict*, Basilio in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Bardolfo in *Falstaff*, and Dr. Blind in *Die Fledermaus*.

Biographies



Sara Miller: Jennifer Mathews

Since 2007, Mezzo soprano Jennifer Mathews has sung with Washington National Opera Chorus where she also sang the roles of Cousin in *Madame Butterfly* (2017), 2nd Bridesmaid in the *Marriage of Figaro* (2010 and 2016), and Girl in *Show Boat* (2013). In 2018, Ms. Mathews performed the role of Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel* with Opera NOVA in Virginia. In 2010, she performed in *Rigoletto* (Madelenda) and *The Merry Widow* (Valencienne) with Opera Camerata. Before moving to Las Vegas in 2018, Ms. Mathews taught for 12 years. Her last teaching position was at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology where she was the choral and theatre director and taught AP Music Theory. There, she directed and conducted musicals: *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Les Miserables*, and *Mary Poppins* and directed plays: *Connected*, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Peter and the Star Catcher*.

Biographies



Young Davis (Saturday): Mel Ibrahim

Mel Ibrahim is 13 years old and attends Thurman White Academy of the Performing Arts, where he majors in choir. Mel has been in several musicals, such as Sussical the Musical, Annie, and James and the Giant Peach. He has taken acting classes in Houston, Texas and songwriting/recording classes at Positively Arts in Las Vegas, Nevada. Mel aspires to be a recording artist and works hard everyday to make that happen. He is thrilled to participate in his first opera, Approaching Ali, as Young Davis. Mel would like to thank his family for all their support and is so excited for this performance!

Biographies



Young Davis (Sunday): Trenton Mellen

Trenton Mellen is a 7th grader at Thurman White Middle School. He participates in the Opera Las Vegas Youth Chorus which performed in *Tosca*, *The Bremen Town Musicians*, and *House Without a Christmas Tree*. Trenton has also been in the opera *Street Scene* at UWW and recently played Ulysses in *The Human Comedy* at NCT. He would like to thank the cast and crew of *Approaching Ali* for being a kind, supportive, and entertaining community.

Biographies



Director: Marc Callahan

Award-winning stage director and designer Marc Callahan has worked on productions at the Royal Opera House, the Aldeburgh Festival, the Holland Festival, Scottish Opera, Miami Music Festival, the New World Center, Théâtre du Châtelet, and the Théâtre du Capitole. Particularly known for his “fringe” productions, Callahan received critical acclaim for Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Les Indes Galantes*, saying it was “*designed and directed with jaw-dropping invention*”

(Michael White, *The Guardian*) and was awarded first prize for his production of Kurt Weill’s *Der Jasager* from the National Opera Association and was a two-time winner of a Charles C. Reilly Director’s Prize. Recent productions include: *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Cendrillon*, and *The Blue Forest*, *Help, Help, the Globolinks!*, *Der Jasager*, *Lohengrin*, *Alcina*, *ATLAS*, *Die Walküre*, *Il sogno di Scipione*, *Albert Herring*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Ordo Virtutum*, and *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (“...devising a brilliant production of remarkable dramatic intimacy.”).

Biographies



Conductor: Joshua Horsch

Praised for conducting with "steady acumen and considerable aplomb" and "awesome control" (*Opera Today*), **Joshua Horsch** is an extremely versatile operatic and symphonic conductor. A two-time winner of the American Prize in Opera Conducting, Joshua serves as Music Director and Principal Conductor of Opera Las Vegas. Joshua's recent and upcoming conducting engagements include appearances with Atlanta Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, Opera Orlando,

Greensboro Opera, Mobile Opera, Pacific Opera Project, Opera Las Vegas, and Tri-Cities Opera. With a diverse repertoire of over sixty operas and a broad spectrum of orchestral and choral works, Joshua has recently held positions as a conductor and pianist/coach on the music staff of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Austin Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, Florida Grand Opera, North Carolina Opera, Opera Saratoga, Pensacola Opera, the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Newport Music Festival. Joshua studied conducting and piano at the University of Colorado Boulder, the Pennsylvania State University, and Ithaca College.

Biographies

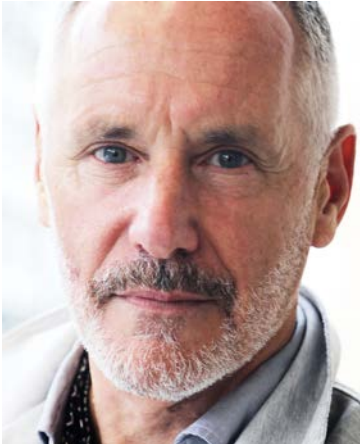


Composer: D.J. Sparr

Composer and electric guitar soloist D. J. SPARR (b. 1975, Westminster, MD), who Gramophone recently hailed as “exemplary,” is one of the preeminent composer-performers of his generation. His eclectic composition style has been described as “pop-Romantic... iridescent and wondrous” (Mercury News) and “suits the boundary-erasing spirit of today’s new-music world” (New York Times). The Los Angeles Times praises him as “an excellent soloist” and the Santa Cruz Sentinel says that he “wowed an enthusiastic audience...Sparr’s guitar sang in a near-human voice.” In 2011, Sparr was named one of NPR listener’s favorite 100 composers under the age 40.

D. J. was the Young American Composer-in-Residence with the California Symphony from 2011-14 and was Composer-in-Residence with the Richmond Symphony from 2009-11. His compositions have been commissioned and performed by organizations such as the Houston Grand Opera, North Carolina Opera, and Eighth Blackbird. Recent/upcoming works include *Katrina: Concerto for Jazz Guitar and Orchestra* (Arkansas Symphony) ...*To me from the earth...* (CAM Raleigh, NC Symphony), & *On Behalf: Metaphor Forty-four* (Tribeca New Music Festival). Of the premiere of *Approaching Ali* (Washington National Opera), the Baltimore Sun writes, “...Sparr knows how to send a vocal line soaring vividly and how to extract a great deal of color from a 10-member orchestra... It also demonstrates Sparr’s considerable potential; his first attempt in this tricky genre lands some very solid punches...like *Ali* in his prime, the score is nimble on its feet.”

Biographies



Librettist: Mark Campbell

Mark Campbell's work as a librettist is at the forefront of the contemporary opera scene in this country. A prolific writer, Mark has created 39 opera librettos, lyrics for 7 musicals, and the text for 6 song cycles and 2 oratorios. His works for the stage have been performed at more than 90 musical venues around the world and the names of his collaborators comprise a roster of the most eminent composers in classical music and include three Pulitzer Prize winners.

Mark's best-known work is *Silent Night*, which received a Pulitzer Prize in Music and is one of the most frequently produced operas in recent history. *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, an audience favorite, received a 2018 GRAMMY Award for Best Opera Recording. Mark's other successful operas include *The Shining*, *Stonewall*, *Later the Same Evening*, *The Nefarious*, *Immoral but Highly Profitable Enterprise of Mr. Burke & Mr. Hare*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *As One*, *The Other Room*, *Empty the House*, *Approaching Ali*, *A Letter to East 11th Street*, *Dinner at Eight*, *Volpone*, *Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World*, *Bernadette's Cozy Book Nook*, *Stone Soup*, and *Bastianello/Lucrezia*. His musicals include *Songs from an Unmade Bed*, *The Audience* and *Splendora*. He has also created a successful new adaptation of Stravinsky/Ramuz's *The Soldier's Story*.

Biographies



Librettist/Author: Davis Miller

Davis Miller is the author of *The Tao of Muhammad Ali* and *The Tao of Bruce Lee*. His writing has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Men's Journal*, *Esquire*, *Sport magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, and numerous other periodicals. His first published story, 'My Dinner with Ali' was voted by the Sunday Magazine Editors Association to be the best essay published in a newspaper magazine in the US in 1989.

Save the Dates

La traviata by Giuseppe Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave: June
9-11, 2023

Information and tickets available at www.operalasvegas.com

About Opera Las Vegas

Opera Las Vegas heads into 2022-23 — its 24th year — of enriching the cultural landscape of Southern Nevada by strengthening our Las Vegas communities' relationship to the art of opera through accessible, engaging, and high caliber performance experiences.

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