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**PEAK PERFORMANCES PRESENTS THE WORLD PREMIERE OF
HATUEY: MEMORY OF FIRE, AN AFRO-CUBAN-YIDDISH OPERA FROM
FRANK LONDON, ELISE THORON, AND MUSIC-THEATRE GROUP,
SEPTEMBER 14-23**

Directed by Mary Birnbaum and Choreographed by Maija Garcia, This First Fully Staged New Yiddish Opera in Nearly a Century Tells the Story of a Jewish Refugee in Cuba and His Deep Connection to a Heroic Taíno Freedom Fighter

Peak Performances Presents

Hatuey: Memory of Fire (World Premiere)
From Frank London, Elise Thoron, and Music-Theatre Group
Composer: Frank London
Librettist: Elise Thoron
Music Director: Constantine Kitsopoulos
Stage Director: Mary Birnbaum
Choreographer: Maija Garcia
Set Designer: Camellia Koo
Lighting Designer: Devorah Kengmana
Costume Designer: Oana Botez

Performances: September 14-23

Critics Welcome Starting September 15

The Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University (1 Normal Ave., Montclair, NJ)

\$30; FREE for Montclair State undergraduates with ID

www.peakperfs.org or 973.655.5112

Peak Performances kicks off its 2018-19 season with the world premiere of *Hatuey: Memory of Fire*, a rousing Afro-Cuban-Yiddish opera performed in English, Yiddish and Spanish, with music by **Frank London**, libretto by **Elise Thoron**, direction by **Mary Birnbaum**, and choreography by **Maija Garcia**. Based on an 87-year-old epic Yiddish poem by Asher Penn, a Jew who fled the pogroms in his native Ukraine and found refuge in Cuba, *Hatuey: Memory of Fire* is a love story that bridges multiple histories of oppression and resistance. The opera moves between the resistance movement stirring in a 1930s Havana nightclub and the setting of Penn's poem: 1511, when Taíno chief Hatuey came to Eastern Cuba from Hispaniola, to warn Cuban natives of impending Spanish invasion. London first happened upon the story of this young Jewish writer and his poem while talking with an old friend, **Michael Posnick**, who began describing his poet father-in-law's escape to Cuba. Performances of *Hatuey: Memory of Fire*, the first fully staged new Yiddish opera in almost a century, will take place September 14-23 at the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University.

In *Hatuey: Memory of Fire*, the young poet Oscar (as Asher was known in Cuba) is played by **Matthew Patrick Morris**, whom *Le Monde* once praised for his “warm baritone voice” and “immense humanity.” Oscar escapes the Ukrainian pogroms of the Soviet Union and lands in Havana. There, he falls in love with a Cuban cabaret chanteuse (Tinima, played by vocalist **Jenn Jade Ledesna**) with a fierce anti-colonial temper. Shattered by the memory of the gruesome attacks in his home village, Oscar identifies with her cry for freedom, and becomes immersed in her revolutionary activities against the corrupt Machado regime. She tells him of Hatuey (**Nate Stampley**, of *Cats*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Lion King*), a Taino warrior of the early 16th century who led a revolt against the Spanish conquistadors in Cuba and lost his own life in a fireball bound to a stake. When asked by his persecutor whether he would go to heaven or hell, Hatuey replied: “Where will you be?” “I will be in heaven,” said the conquistador. “Then I prefer to go to hell,” declared Hatuey, forever memorializing his tragic fate. Hatuey is celebrated to this day as a precursor of Cuba’s ongoing fight for freedom.

Penn’s epic poem, written in Yiddish, suggests a powerful affinity between those who have seen their people oppressed, terrorized and murdered at the hands of conquering forces. In *Hatuey: Memory of Fire*, Penn and Hatuey’s stories merge, as characters shift in time and place from a Havana nightclub to Hatuey’s storied encounter with the Spanish invaders. London’s “original score combines Jewish and Afro-Cuban music, avant-garde contemporary classical and jazz, and 16th-century Spanish and Italian vocal music ... [moving] seamlessly from an Afro-Cuban rumba with Janacek-inspired harmonies, to tunes mixing Jewish holiday liturgy with traditional chants and drumming of the Yoruba as practiced in Cuba” (*New Music World*).

“I always wanted to write a Yiddish opera, but I didn’t want to write just a shtetl opera,” Frank London told the BBC. “For some reason I had other ideas... [Michael Posnick mentioned] that his father-in-law escaped the pogroms. His family in Ukraine couldn’t get into the U.S. at that point because of immigration restrictions against refugees, so he made it to Havana... and wrote this epic 125-page Yiddish poem. And I said, ‘that’s my opera.’” (Asher Penn would go on to found *Havaner Leb’n*, Cuba’s first Jewish weekly, then immigrate to America, where he worked for the *Jewish Daily Forward* and penned *Judaism in America*).

When London began collaborating on the project with Thoron, she suggested the idea of setting the opera in both Penn and Hatuey’s respective times and interweaving them, to celebrate the specificities of the multiple cultures and languages *Hatuey: Memory of Fire* considers. The full, 110-minute opera makes its world premiere at Peak Performances following an earlier version staged in Havana in 2017 with Opera de la Calle. Jewish Cuban anthropologist Ruth Behar, who played the “matchmaker” between the *Hatuey: Memory of Fire* team (the “Hatueyeros”) and Opera de La Calle’s director Ulises Aquino, wrote in *Forward* about perceptions of the performance in a country with an evolving albeit fragile relationship with America, and with a current population of approximately only 1,400 Jews. “The story of how the opera got to the island is one of building bridges between Cubans and Cuban Americans... Bringing the opera to Cuba, where Penn had written his Yiddish poem of empathy for the indigenous people of the island, would be an act of remembrance, showing how deeply the Jews had identified with the independence struggles of the island. The mostly Cuban audience knew nothing of Yiddish and little about the Jews. Yet they rocked to the Yiddish songs.”

“I think this is historic,” Aquino told the BBC of the production in Cuba. “Never before—including before the Revolution—have we seen a collaboration of this kind between Cuban lyrical and musical theater and North American musical theater.”

Hatuey: Memory of Fire, co-conceived and created by **Frank London** and **Elise Thoron**, and produced by **Music-Theatre Group**, is performed by **Jenn Jade Ledesna** (Tinima), **Matthew Patrick Morris** (Oscar), **Nate Stampley** (Hatuey/Lazaro), **Martin Sola** (Velasquez/Machado), **Nicolette Malvroleon** (Kasika/Alicia), **Gerardo Contino** (Ernesto), **Ethan Simpson** (Behike/Victorio), **Jorell Williams** (Priest/Hector), **Enrique Acevedo** (Cortez/Hernan), **Sandra Marante** (Cachita), **Jen Anaya** (Ondina), **Eliza Bonet** (Concepcion), **Lauren Cox** (Ziomara), **Abdiel Jacobsen** (Orestes), and **Tislarm Bouie** (Ramon). The creative team includes **Frank London** (Music) **Elise Thoron** (Libretto), **Mary Birnbaum** (Stage Director), **Constantine Kitsopoulos** (Music Director), **Maija Garcia** (Choreography), **Camellia Koo** (Set Design), **Oana Botez** (Costume Design), and **Devorah Kengmana** (Lighting Design).

Performance Schedule and Ticketing

Performances of *Hatuey: Memory of Fire* will take place at the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University (1 Normal Ave, Montclair, NJ), Friday, September 14-23. Performances will take place September 14, 20, & 21 at 7:30pm, September 15 & 22 at 8pm, and September 16 and 23 at 3pm. Critics are welcome at performances starting Saturday, September 15.

Tickets, affordably priced at \$30 (and free for Montclair State University undergraduates), can be purchased at www.peakperfs.org or 973.655.5112.

Acknowledgments

Hatuey: Memory of Fire was developed in residence at the Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair State University; with Ulises Aquino's Opera de la Calle in Havana, Cuba; with Diane Wondisford at Music-Theatre Group in NYC; with National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene; and in residence at both the Sundance Institute's Theatre Lab at Mass MOCA and in Ucross.

About the Creative Team

Frank London (Composer)

Sir Frank London is a Grammy Award-winning trumpeter and composer. In addition to *Hatuey: Memory of Fire*, his large-scale projects include the dance/poetry work *Salomé, Woman of Valor* (with Adeena Karasick), the museum installation film *Letters from Afar* (with filmmaker Peter Forgacs and the Klezmatics), the folk opera *A Night In The Old Marketplace* (based on Y.L. Peretz's 1907 play), Pilobolus Dance Theater's *Davenen*, Great Small Works' *The Memoirs Of Gluckel Of Hameln*, Min Tanaka's *Romance, 1001 Voices: A Symphony for a New America* (libretto: Judith Sloan, projections: Warren Lehrer), for orchestra, chorus, soloists, and tabla; *Green Violin* (with Elise Thoron), winner of the the Barrymore Prize for Best New Musical; and *From Moses to Mostel* (with Glen Berger).

London is co-founder of The Klezmatics, and leads the bhangra/Yiddish band, Sharabi (with Deep Singh), the astro-Hungarian supergroup Glass House Orchestra, the Shekhinah Big Band, and his Klezmer Brass Allstars. He has worked with John Zorn, Karen O, Itzhak Perlman, Pink Floyd, LL Cool J, Mel Tormé, Lester Bowie, LaMonte Young, They Might Be Giants, David Byrne, Jane Siberry, Ben Folds 5, Mark Ribot, Hector LaVoe; and is featured on over 500 CDs.

In 2019, London will premiere the song cycle *Ghetto Songs* at the prestigious Hamburg Elbephilharmonie, and will be Music Director for Carnegie Hall's celebration of Yiddish, *From Shtetl to Stage*. He composed music for John Sayles' *The Brother from Another Planet*, Yvonne Rainer's *MURDER and murder*, Karin Coonrod's *The Merchant of Venice*, the Czech-American Marionette Theater's *Golem* and Tamar Rogoff's *Ivye Project*. London was Artistic Director of *KlezKanada*; music director for David Byrne and Robert Wilson's *The Knee Plays*; and has been featured on HBO's *Sex and The City*. He was knighted by Hungary for his work advancing Jewish and multicultural Hungarian music and culture.

Elise Thoron (Librettist)

Elise Thoron is a playwright, director, and translator whose plays have been produced in the United States, Europe, Japan, and Cuba. Productions include *Green Violin*, with music by Frank London (*Nine Contemporary Jewish Plays*); *Prozak and the Platypus*, with music by Jill Sobule (CD/graphic novella); *Charlotte: Life? Or Theater?*, music by Gary Fagin based on paintings by Charlotte Salomon; *Recycling: washi tales*, an ongoing collaboration with distinguished Japanese paper artist, Kyoko Ibe and traditional Japanese performers. For over twenty years, Elise created cross-cultural exchanges with Russian and American theater artists. She directed the first Sam Shepherd play in Russia, and adapted and directed *The Great Gatsby* in Russian at a The Pushkin Theater in Moscow, where it played for over nine years. As Associate Artistic Director at American Place Theatre, Elise developed and directed new plays, and co-founded *Literature to Life*, a highly successful theater literacy program now in its third decade nationwide. Among the books she has adapted for *Literature to Life* are: Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, also a production at Seattle's Book-it Theater; Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*; Lowry's *The Giver*; and Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. With Tony award-winning spoken word poet Lemon Andersen, she developed *County of Kings* for students, before directing it at The Public Theater, Spoleto Festival, and venues around the world. At the Public, Elise also directed Lemon's first play, *ToasT*, about the Attica prison uprising, developed at the Sundance Theatre Lab. Elise was commissioned by Oregon Shakespeare Festival to update *The Merchant of Venice* into contemporary verse. Her translations of Russian plays are produced and published in the United States and Canada.

Mary Birnbaum (Stage Director)

Nominated for Best Newcomer of 2015 at the International Opera Awards in London, Mary Birnbaum has been singled out as a stage director to watch. Her recent production of *The Rape of Lucretia* at Juilliard garnered a rave from Anthony Tommasini at *The New York Times* who called it "viscerally overwhelming." Other New York credits include *Die Zauberflöte* (Juilliard), the premiere of Jeremy Denk and Steven Stucky's *The Classical Style* at Carnegie Hall in December 2014, and a 9-singer chamber version of *Eugene Onegin*, also for the Juilliard School, co-led by conductor Matt Aucoin. Internationally, her work has taken her to Taiwan, Melbourne, Costa Rica, and Tel Aviv. In the summer of 2016, she directed *Otello* at the National Symphony Orchestra, Taipei. Regionally, she has directed in Seattle, Santa Fe, Houston TX, Ojai and Berkeley, CA, Columbus, OH, and Charlottesville, VA. Her production of *Hänsel und Gretel* in Houston was #2 on a list of 'Best Operas in 2014,' following only the Ring Cycle at HGO.

Ms. Birnbaum has produced and developed new plays and theatrical events in New York. From 2009-2012, Birnbaum founded/ran a theater company, Art Party, which produced story-specific events that engaged the audience in creative ways. *STARBOX*, a performance installation in Bryant Park, involved the audience lining up for a face-to-face meeting with a star. However the real

play happened while the audience waited, as over 40 actors performed scenes all over the park. She has also worked with playwrights to develop new work, most notably in the Soho Rep Writers/Directors Lab and at Ars Nova. She co-wrote/directed a feminist pop-concert called *Baby No More Times* with Melissa Lusk and Caroline V. McGraw. Recent projects include the premiere of Kristin Kuster and Megan Levad's opera *Kept* at the Virginia Arts Festival, *Double Exposure* at Opera Philadelphia and *As One* at Lyric Opera Kansas City.

Birnbaum was invited to teach acting at Juilliard at age 26 and now holds the position of Associate Director of the Artist Diploma Program. In addition, she has worked with singers from the Lindemann program in acting class and scenes. She has also taught master classes at Mannes and Opera Workshop at Bard.

Maija Garcia (Choreographer)

Maija Garcia is a Cuban-American director and choreographer whose signature work is featured in Guthrie Theater's *West Side Story* directed by Joe Haj, Spike Lee's Netflix series *She's Gotta Have It* and Amazon feature film *Chi-Raq*. Garcia directed *Salsa, Mambo, Cha Cha Cha* in La Habana Cuba, Heather Henson and Ty Defoe's *CRANE* at the Lied Center in Nebraska, and *Legend of Yauna* featuring Zap Mama at BAM Fisher. Choreography credits include *Snow in Midsummer* at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, *Cuba Libre* by Carlos Lacámara at Artists Repertory Theater, *Another Word for Beauty* by Jose Rivera at the Goodman Theater, and *Fats Waller Dance Party* with Jason Moran and Meshell N'degeocello at Harlem Stage, Kennedy Center and international Jazz festivals. Garcia worked alongside Bill T. Jones to choreograph the Tony Award winning musical *FELA! On Broadway*, becoming creative director of *FELA! World Tour* and *FELA! The Concert*. Graduate of California Institute of Integral Studies with a BA in Sustainable Development, Garcia founded Organic Magnetics to generate urban folklore for the future, producing *Ghosts of Manhattan: 1512-2012, an interactive history* in Fort Tryon Park and *I Am NY: Juan Rodriguez* at El Museo del Barrio.

Camellia Koo (Set Designer)

Camellia Koo is a Toronto-based set and costume designer for theater, opera, dance and site-specific performance installations. Recent designs for opera include *Marilyn Forever* (Aventa Ensemble), *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (Edmonton Opera), *Maria Stuarda* (Pacific Opera Victoria), *The Lighthouse* (Boston Lyric Opera), *The Turn of the Screw* and *La bohème* (Against the Grain), *Dido and Aeneas* (*Opera on the Avalon*), *Don Giovanni* (University of Toronto), *Giiwedín* (Native Earth) and *The Shadow* (Tapestry New Opera). She was associate designer on productions of *The Magic Flute* (Budapest State Opera) and *Candide* (ENO/Châtelet/Hyogo PAC, Japan) for designer Michael Levine. Recent designs for theater include collaborations with numerous midsize to regional theater companies including Tarragon Theater, Young People's Theater, The Second City (Toronto and Chicago), Soulpepper Theatre Company, and six seasons at The Shaw Festival. She is a graduate of Ryerson University and completed her M.A. in Scenography at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (UK) and the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten (Utrecht, The Netherlands). She is also an alumni of the Lincoln Center Theater's Director's Lab.

She has received five Dora Mavor Moore Awards (Toronto), a Sterling Award (Edmonton), a Chalmers Award Grant, shared the 2006 Siminovitch Protégé Prize awarded to her by designer Dany Lyne; and was a member of the Third Prize Team with Joel Ivany and Jason Hand at the 2011 European Opera Directing Prize. Most recently, she was named to the Top Ten Theater Artists of the Year list for a third time by Toronto's arts weekly Now Magazine.

Upcoming plans include designs for *Albert Herring* (University of Toronto), *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Against the Grain), *The Sea* (The Shaw Festival), and *A God in Need of Help* (Tarragon Theater).

Oana Botez (Costume Designer)

Oana Botez is a Princess Grace Recipient and NEA/TCG Career Development Program Recipient. Oana is a recipient of both The Barrymore and Drammy Award. Her designs have raised critical acclaim in New York's: BAM Next Wave, Bard SummerScape/Richard B.Fisher Center, Baryshnikov Arts Center, The David H. Koch Theater/Lincoln Center, Soho Rep, LCT3, The Public Theater, 59East59, La MaMa, The Kitchen, PS122, HERE Arts Center, The Joyce Theater, The Ontological-Hysteric Theater, BRIC Arts Media, Big Apple Circus/Lincoln Center and The Classic Stage Company. Regionally: The Wilma Theater (Philadelphia, PA), Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (MA), Hartford Stage Company (CT), Long Wharf Theater (New Haven, CT), Shakespeare Theater (DC), Berkeley Rep (Berkeley, CA), ArtsEmerson (Boston, MA), Broad Stage (Santa Monica, CA), MCA (Chicago, IL), Shakespeare Theatre Company (Washington, D.C), ODC (San Francisco), The Walker Arts Center (Minneapolis, MN), Peak Performances (Montclair, NJ), ADI (Rockville, MD), Academy of Music (Philadelphia, PA), Curtis Institute of Music (Philadelphia, PA), Cutler Majestic Theater (Boston, MA). Internationally: Bucharest National Theater

(Romania), Arad National Theater (Romania), Bulandra Theater (Bucharest), Théâtre National de Chaillot (Paris), Les Subsistances (Lyon, France), Budapest National Theater, Cluj Hungarian National Theater (Romania), Bucharest Operetta Theater (Romania), International Festival of Contemporary Theater (Adana, Turkey), Le Quartz (Brest, France), La Filature (Mulhouse, France), Exit Festival /Maison des Arts Creteil (Paris, France), Tanz im August Festival Hebbel am Ufer – HAU1 (Berlin, Germany), Centro Cultural Universidad del Pacifico (Lima, Peru), Centro Cultural (Lima, Peru), Palazzo Simoncelli (Orvieto, Italy), Edinburgh International Festival (UK), Singapore Arts Festival.

Devorah Kengmana (Lighting Designer)

Devorah Kengmana is a New York City-based lighting and projections designer. She holds a S.B. in Theatre Technology from MIT and an M.F.A. in Lighting Design from UMKC. She has worked at the San Francisco Opera and was named the 2016 Lighting Design Fellow at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She has assisted designers such as Jane Cox, Christopher Akerlind, Victor En Yu Tan, Japhy Weidemann, Yi Zhao, Jake DeGroot, Rocco DiSanti, Oona Curley, and Alan Edwards. Her designs include *The Niceties* (Portland Stage Company), *OPIUM* (Spiegelworld Productions, Associate LD), *The Mecca Tales* (Voyage Theatre Company, Crossroads Theatre Company), *Beyond the Oak Trees* (Crossroads Theatre Company, World Premiere), *A Christmas Carol* (Merrimack Repertory Theatre), *The Convert* (Central Square Theatre), *Nectar* (Axial Theatre Company), *Clybourne Park* (Unicorn Theatre), and *Journey's End* (Kansas City Actors' Theatre).

Music-Theatre Group (Producer)

Music-Theatre Group (Diane Wondisford, Producing Director) is dedicated to helping artists turn creative inspiration into dramatically compelling works of art. MTG has created collaborations among composer, poets, writers, directors, choreographers, designers, and performers, working with them from the beginning and throughout the life of their projects to develop and produce thought-provoking works of music-theatre that blur the boundaries among music/theatre/opera. Seminal works include: *Crossing* by Matthew Aucoin, Diane Paulus (dir.);

Dark Sisters by Nico Muhly and Stephen Karam, Rebecca Taichman (dir.); *Death and the Powers* by Tod Machover, Robert Pinsky, Randy Weiner, Diane Paulus (dir.); *Arjuna's Dilemma* by Douglas Cuomo, Robin Guarino (dir.); *Running Man* by Diedre Murray, Cornelius Eady, Diane Paulus (dir.); *Marco Polo* by Tan Dun and Paul Griffiths, Martha Clarke (dir.); *Juan Darien* by Julie Taymor and Elliot Goldenthal; Eve Ensler's *Extraordinary Measures*, William Harper (music); M. Clarke's *Garden of Earthly Delights* and *Vienna: Lusthaus*, Richard Peaslee (music), text by Charles Mee; and *Dr. Selavy's Magic Theatre* by Stanley Silverman and Richard Foreman. MTG has collaborated with Opera Philadelphia and its Composer in Residence program, featuring Lembit Beecher, Missy Mazzoli, David Little, Andrew Norman, David Hertzberg, and Rene Orth. Recently *The Nefarious, Immoral, but Highly Profitable Enterprise of Mr. Burke & Mr. Hare* by Julian Grant and Mark Campbell, David Schweizer (dir.), commissioned and developed by MTG and produced by Boston Lyric Opera in November, 2017 was nominated for an International Opera Award for Best World Premiere. MTG artists have been recognized with MacArthur Fellowships, and these works by their peers with OBIE Awards and TONY nominations, and as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize.

We are deeply grateful to our partners in development: Sundance Theater Institute, Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, Opera de la Calle, and PEAK Performances for the significant contributions they made to bring *Hatuey* to the stage.

About Peak Performances

Peak Performances is a program of the Office of Arts and Cultural Programming at Montclair State University and has been honored by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with an Arts Citation of Excellence and Designation of Major Impact. Programs in this season are made possible in part by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts; the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project, with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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