



Washington National Opera
The Kennedy Center

Timothy O'Leary
General Director

Francesca Zambello
Artistic Director

Press Release

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For Release:
August 30, 2023

Washington National Opera Presents **GROUND**

**World Premiere by Composer Jeanine Tesori and Librettist George Brant
Starring Mezzo-Soprano Emily D'Angelo in her WNO Debut**

**Kennedy Center Opera House
October 28–November 13**

(WASHINGTON)—**Washington National Opera** (WNO) opens its 2023–2024 season with the world premiere of *Grounded*, October 28–November 13. Composed by two-time Tony Award® winner **Jeanine Tesori** with a libretto adapted by **George Brant** from his eponymous play, and directed by Tony Award® winner **Michael Mayer**, *Grounded* is commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera and co-produced with the Washington National Opera.

Grounded tells the story of Jess, an accomplished F-16 fighter pilot who is “grounded” from flying because of an unexpected pregnancy. When returning to duty, she is reassigned to combat by operating lethal drones from a trailer in Las Vegas, thousands of miles away from the battlefield. The juxtaposition of using her elite training to protect and serve America by day while returning to her family at night creates a moral and psychological tension that plays out onstage. Playing the role of Jess is “one of the world’s special young singers” (*The New York Times*), **Emily D'Angelo**, in her WNO debut. The cast also includes **Joseph Dennis** as Eric, **Morris Robinson** as the Commander, **Frederick Ballentine** as the Trainer, **Kyle Miller** as the Sensor, and **Teresa Perrotta** as Also Jess, with **Daniela Candillari** conducting the **Washington National Opera Orchestra**.

Grounded tackles subjects rarely seen in opera: drone warfare and its impact on service members and their caregivers. When Brant’s play was first staged in 2013, drone warfare was a new technology. Now drones are used commonly on the battlefields and beyond, but their impact is less understood. To present these issues in opera form, Brant expanded his one-woman play into a multi-character libretto, giving full voice to those in the pilot’s orbit. Working with Tesori, Brant created new characters, such as “Also Jess,” who embodies the pilot’s dissociated self, and a male chorus called the “Drone Squadron,” a haunted group reflecting the history of combat.

The set, designed by Tony Award® winner **Mimi Lien**, is comprised of two huge screens made from 224 and 84 individual LED panels across the floor and the ceiling. These panels are mapped with integrated

software for real-time video and projection effects to immerse audiences in the psychological and social implications of remote warfare.

“George’s play opens a window to a world that we may not know but should care more about. We are proud Jeanine, one of the most distinct composers of our generation, has turned it into an opera,” says WNO Artistic Director **Francesca Zambello**. “Through operas like *Grounded* and *Blue*, she is pioneering the future of the art form, positioning opera as a seminal force in our society. Her operas foster dialogue around important cultural issues and ultimately help our communities become more inclusive, respectful, and empathetic. In this way, I passionately believe that Jeanine is not only pioneering the future of opera, but her powerful music is also creating a better world.”

“At WNO, we believe in art that illuminates, inspires, and builds empathy. *Grounded* gives us an opportunity to do this with subject matter that is not only modern, but forward-looking,” said WNO General Director **Timothy O’Leary**. “To highlight the stories of those on the frontlines of technology-driven warfare, the WNO team has been connecting with veteran and military communities, in part by partnering with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, Stop Soldier Suicide, the Military Women’s Memorial, and Armed Services Arts Partnership. We hope this work will spark dialogue about mental health and post-traumatic stress for those, like the character of Jess, whose mission it is to serve.”

MILITARY OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

In acknowledgement of and to honor the service members and military communities in and around the D.C. area, WNO is collaborating with them to further explore the themes of the opera and provide access to resources. These partnerships and engagement events include the following:

- **October 8, 2023 at 10a.m. –12p.m.—Workshop with Armed Services Arts Partnership at the REACH:** WNO will partner with the Armed Services Arts Partnership (ASAP), which provides free art and theater instruction to veterans, and offer a free workshop led by *Grounded* librettist George Brant. ASAP aims to ease veterans’ transition to civilian life through arts classes that help them rediscover the bonds of their service and become part of a community with common experiences.
- **October 23, 2023 at 5:30p.m.—Performance and discussion at the Military Women’s Memorial:** WNO Cafritz Young Artists will perform selections from *Grounded*, followed by a panel discussion featuring George Brant, high-level representatives from the Department of Defense and military families, and a former female fighter pilot to engage the audience in the themes explored by the opera, including the experience of women in male-dominated roles, how those roles impact a woman's personal relationships, the experience of women in combat, and the new dynamics of modern warfare and the aftermath.
- **October 24, 2023 at 7p.m.—*Grounded* Open Rehearsal for Students:** WNO will host an open rehearsal of *Grounded* for high school students, who are encouraged to access a repository of free online content on WNO’s education page to enrich their understanding.
- **November 1, 2023—“Courage in Service” in partnership with The Elizabeth Dole Foundation & Hidden Heroes:** The Elizabeth Dole Foundation and WNO will invite 100 members of the military

community to join a special pre-show reception before the November 1st performance of *Grounded*, as well as a post opera Q&A, open to the entire audience. "Courage in Service" will celebrate the resiliency and bravery of the military community while also allowing space to explore the aspects of military life that are most physically and emotionally challenging.

- **Partnership with Stop Soldier Suicide:** WNO seeks to support America's heroes by providing access to mental health resources through its partnership with Stop Soldier Suicide, a national non-profit that seeks to prevent soldier suicide by addressing the underlying issues before they escalate into a crisis. A table of resources, staffed by Kennedy Center volunteers and service members, will be in the lobby before, during intermission, and following each *Grounded* performance.
- **Pre-performance Talks:** Before every performance, WNO leaders and artistic partners, including Artistic Director Francesca Zambello and *Grounded* librettist George Brant, will host pre-performance lectures about the opera an hour before each performance.
- **Post-performance Artists Q&A Sessions:** To help audience members process the opera's complex themes, prominent members of the military community, as well as experts in drone warfare and mental health professionals will participate in post-performance discussions, followed by Q&A sessions. These are scheduled after the productions on November 1, 5, and 13.

Grounded

Music by Jeanine Tesori

Libretto by George Brant

In English with Projected English Titles

World Premiere; *Grounded* is commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera and co-produced with the Washington National Opera

Opera House at John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts

Saturday, October 28, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.

Wednesday, November 1, 2023 at 7:30 p.m.

Friday, November 3, 2023 at 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, November 5, 2023 at 2:00 p.m.

Saturday, November 11, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, November 13, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.

Cast/Creatives

Jess

Eric

Commander

Trainer

Sensor

Also Jess

Emily D'Angelo*

Joseph Dennis*

Morris Robinson

Frederick Ballentine†

Kyle Miller

Teresa Perrotta

Conductor	Daniela Candillari*
Director	Michael Mayer*
Set Designer	Mimi Lien*
Costume Designer	Tom Broecker*
Lighting Designer	Kevin Adams*
Co-production Designers	Jason H. Thompson* and Kaitlyn Pietras*
Dramaturg	Paul Cremo*
Choreographer	David Neumann*

* WNO mainstage debut

† Alumnus of the Cafritz Young Artist program

ABOUT WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

Washington National Opera (WNO) is one of the leading opera companies in the United States. Under the leadership of General Director Timothy O’Leary and world-renowned Artistic Director Francesca Zambello, the company presents a diverse repertory of grand opera across three main venues of the Kennedy Center. From classic operas to contemporary works, each season the WNO’s artistic output also includes commissioned American works and a variety of special concerts, youth operas, and events. Founded in 1956 and an artistic affiliate of the Kennedy Center since 2011, WNO has a storied legacy of more than 100 new productions, plus world premieres, international tours, live recordings, and radio broadcasts, digitally streamed content, as well as innovative education and community-engagement programs. Recent celebrated productions have included a new production of Strauss’ *Elektra*; the D.C. premiere of Jeanine Tesori’s and Tazewell Thompson’s *Blue*, which was commissioned by Zambello; the world premiere of *Written in Stone*—composed for the Kennedy Center’s 50th anniversary season; the world premiere of Philip Glass’ reconceived *Appomattox*, presented in conjunction with cultural events throughout Washington, D.C.; the powerful performances of Kurt Weill’s *Lost in the Stars*; and the massive feat of WNO’s first complete *Ring* Cycle, which was helmed by Zambello and played to sold-out houses following international acclaim. The 2023–2024 season includes the world premiere of *Grounded* by Jeanine Tesori and George Brant, and *Turandot* with a new ending by Christopher Tin and Susan Soon He Stanton. WNO is committed to expanding opera’s reach and fostering a new generation of opera talent. Among the company’s most successful education and community engagement programs are the American Opera Initiative (AOI), the Cafritz Young Artist Program, the WNO Opera Institute, *Opera in the Outfield*®, in-person and digital Look-In performances, the Student Dress Rehearsal Program, free pre-concert lectures and post-show Q&As after many shows, the WNO Young Associates program, and the *Let’s Go There* discussion series.

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#GroundedWNO

Funding Credits

The WNO Season Sponsor is General Dynamics

The Official Airline of the WNO Season is American Airlines

Major support provided by Jacqueline Badger Mars and Mrs. Eugene B. Casey

Support for the production of Grounded is provided by Mr. and Mrs. Eric Larsen

Ticket Information

Tickets may be purchased online at kennedy-center.org, in-person at the Kennedy Center Box Office, or by calling (202) 467-4600.

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