



TRUNK SHOW! A Fashionable Fantasia of Women on the World Stage

Project Description

TRUNK SHOW! will be a semi-devised lyric-theatrical fantasy pastiche inspired by the great divas of the 17th-19th centuries, including their extraordinary contributions to the social and economic emancipation of women. It will include virtuosic arias from the time periods these singers lived in as well as new arias by contemporary composers featuring modern women in positions of power and prestige.

TRUNK SHOW! is inspired by Kathleen McDermott's research, public speaking and art-making about the lives and careers of twenty-six legendary opera divas. An artist and fashion historian, she was struck by the visual impact of their grand couture but deep research revealed that their clothing was more significant than first met the eye. Divas used fashion as a marketing tool; part of the allure of attending a performance was to see the latest Paris fashion. More importantly, opera stars were the first large group of public career women able to amass wealth through the enormous fees they commanded, despite laws preventing women from having full control of their earnings and real property. What they could own outright were their personal effects: clothing and jewelry, and it was through these luxury items that singers kept their "bank." In this way and others, these women were at the forefront of changing ideas about women's rights – economic, social, and political.

These historic divas also had considerable sway on the artistic content and structure of their performances, often arranging to insert their most recent personal showpiece or "trunk" aria into any opera. Composers took into account the specific virtuosity of their voices when composing roles and many of the women had direct musical influences on the structure and composition of works they performed.

TRUNK SHOW! will explore the repertoire of these so-called "trunk arias," as well as the lives of those singers, bringing them together as characters in dialogue with each other, and with characters borne out of this commission competition: the powerful women of our day and of the future who still live under so much scrutiny. What would these women say to each other across time, about art, about business? What would they say to today's singers and audience? What would they want their roles to look like if they were performing today?

OperaHub is committed to this project because we wish to be at the forefront of creating relevant, compelling, and important opera for the many talented women in our field. We would like the storylines of contemporary opera to mirror more closely the rich and varied female experience. Women, in both classic and many contemporary works, often have too little authority and agency and to the extent they are featured in opera, the plot typically revolves around their romantic intrigue. Moreover, we would like to see a significant shift in opera's casting demographics; many prominent new operas are still written primarily about groups of men, thereby providing several rich roles for men and fewer or less interesting ones for women. Women have been prominent community figures and important thinkers in real life for many more years than they have been consistently portrayed that way onstage.

When considered as a whole, TRUNK SHOW! strives to examine the representation of women in opera and as public figures through the centuries and to provide opportunities for women in our field to perform work that challenges and inspires them both musically and intellectually. In so doing, we hope to make a significant contribution to the conversation about the condition of female representation in the contemporary opera world. Ultimately, we aim to push the form toward richer depictions of the female experience onstage.