



MASTEROICES PERFORMS NEW YORK PREMIERE OF
BLIND INJUSTICE, AN AMERICAN OPERA WITH MUSIC BY SCOTT DAVENPORT RICHARDS
AND LIBRETTO BY DAVID COTE, AT THE ROSE THEATER AT JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
ON FEBRUARY 3-4, 2025

With Stage Direction and Dramaturgy by Robin Guarino and Musical Direction by Ted Sperling,
Based on the Case Work of the Ohio Innocence Project and the Book by Mark Godsey



New York, NY, December 9, 2024 — On **Monday, February 3** and **Tuesday, February 4**, at the **Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center**, Artistic Director **Ted Sperling** leads the 120–member **MasterVoices Chorus** and 12 cast members in the **New York premiere** of the acclaimed opera, **Blind Injustice**, with music by **Scott Davenport Richards** and libretto by **David Cote**. *Blind Injustice* tells the true story of the Ohio Innocence Project’s work to overturn the convictions of six men, women, and teens who were wrongly imprisoned for violent crimes they didn’t commit. The opera is based on the book of the same name by **Mark Godsey** and the casework by the **Ohio Innocence Project at the University of Cincinnati College of Law**.

Immediately following each performance, there will be a 30-minute moderated conversation with **four exonerees** portrayed in the opera: **Nancy Smith, Laurese Glover, Clarence Elkins, and Rickey Jackson**, as well as artists and experts working in the field of criminal justice reform. Conversations are free to ticket holders.

The inspiring 90-minute work in staged presentation showcases an operatic score infused with jazz, gospel, funk, hip-hop, and musical theater. The cast members are: “appealing suave” (*Opera News*) baritone **Phillip Bullock**; tenor **Thomas Capobianco**, who has roles in four Met Opera productions this season; tenor **Joshua Dennis**, praised for his “voluptuous, elegant tone” in *Opera News*; baritone **Eric Shane Heatley**, who created the role of exoneree Rickey Jackson at the Cincinnati Opera world premiere of *Blind Injustice*; “radiant” (*New York Times*) mezzo-soprano **Briana Hunter**; stage and screen veteran, baritone **Marc Kudisch**, a three-time Tomy Award nominee and Drama Desk Award winner; Canadian soprano **Reilly Nelson** (“a superb timbre and technique,” *Opera News*); rising soprano **Victoria Okafor**, who created the

role of Alesha in *Blind Injustice* in the world premiere; baritone **Joseph Parrish**, whose “powerful run of soulful colors washed the hall in emotion” (*Opera Wire*) at a recent NYC gala; baritone **Christian Pursell**, who made his Met Opera debut this September as Sciarrone in *Tosca*; tenor **Orson Van Gay II**, who created the role of Raymond Santana in the world premiere of Anthony Davis’s *Central Park Five*; and award-winning baritone **Miles Wilson-Toliver**, who created the role of exoneree Eugene Johnson in the world premiere of *Blind Injustice*.

The stage direction and dramaturgy are by **Robin Guarino** and musical direction is by **Ted Sperling**. The costume design is by **Tracy Christensen** and lighting design is by **Jason Flamos**.

Blind Injustice makes its New York premiere following a critically praised world premiere at Cincinnati Opera in 2019 (Heidi Waleson, *Wall Street Journal*: “Seamless, hard-hitting and affecting. A powerful critique of the criminal justice system.”) and a subsequent production at PEAK Performances at Montclair State University (MSU) with Ted Sperling conducting and members of the MasterVoices Chorus joining MSU choristers in February 2024. The live CD/Album recorded in Cincinnati was cited by *Opera News* as one of the 5 Best New Opera Recordings of 2022.

Based on the MSU performances, Maestro Sperling knew *Blind Injustice* was a good fit for MasterVoices’s season. He says, “The use of a larger chorus in the New York premiere will make its already-important role even more poignant. At times in this work, the chorus makes you feel like the whole world is against the six exonerees; and at other times, like the whole world is crying to set them free, supporting the six. With our large, diverse chorus, this should be very powerful.”

Blind Injustice

Monday, February 3, 2025, 7:30 pm

Tuesday, February 4, 2025, 7:30 pm

Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center

Music by Scott Davenport Richards

Lyrics by David Cote

Stage Direction and Dramaturgy by Robin Guarino

Based on casework by the **Ohio Innocence Project at the University of Cincinnati College of Law** and the book *Blind Injustice* by **Mark Godsey**

MasterVoices Chorus

MasterVoices Orchestra

Ted Sperling, Music Director and Conductor

Costumes designed by **Tracy Christensen**

Lighting design by **Jason Flamos**

Stage Manager **Dana Gemeinhardt**

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Christian Pursell, baritone, PROSECUTOR

Joshua Dennis, tenor, DEFENSE ATTORNEY

Victoria Okafor, soprano, ALESHA

Reilly Nelson, soprano, NANCY SMITH

Orson Van Gay II, tenor, LAURESE GLOVER

Phillip Bullock, baritone, DERRICK WHEATT

Miles Wilson-Toliver, baritone, EUGENE JOHNSON
Thomas Capobianco, tenor, CLARENCE ELKINS
Eric Shane Heatley, baritone, RICKEY JACKSON
Briana Hunter, mezzo-soprano, DERRICK'S MOTHER/ENSEMBLE
Marc Kudisch, baritone, EARL MANN/ENSEMBLE
Joseph Parrish, baritone, EARL MANN'S CELLMATE/EDWARD VERNON/ENSEMBLE

Tickets, priced from \$30, may be purchased online at jazz.org, at the Jazz at Lincoln Center box office, Broadway at 60th Street, or by calling 212-721-6500.

In March 2024, MasterVoices announced *Three in Six*, an initiative to present three contemporary American operas in six years, the first opera being the revival of Ricky Ian Gordon's *The Grapes of Wrath* this past April. *Blind Injustice* is the second in the series.

The exonerees depicted in the piece are **Rickey Jackson**, who spent 39 years in prison for a crime he did not commit; **Nancy Smith**, a Head Start bus driver falsely accused of molesting children and who spent more than 14 years in prison; **Clarence Elkins**, wrongly convicted of the murder of his mother-in-law and rape of her young granddaughter; and the East Cleveland 3: **Laurese Glover**, **Eugene Johnson**, and **Derrick Wheatt**, witnesses in a shooting who, despite tainted evidence, were convicted.

Said creators Scott Davenport Richards and David Cote, and Robin Guarino, "Mark Godsey and the six exonerees were central to our creative process. After Cincinnati Opera partnered with Young Professionals Choral Collective to create an opera based on Mark's book and actual cases taken up by the Ohio Innocence Project, we dove into research. Interviews with Mark, Rickey, Nancy, Clarence, Laurese, Derrick, and Eugene formed the foundation of the libretto. As Scott began to compose each scene, we consulted them on accuracy and tone. They attended workshops, befriended the performers, inspired new scenes, and—most important of all—gave us their blessing.

Blind Injustice is an opera about stories a society tells itself to justify routine dehumanization of its most vulnerable citizens. Our criminal justice system is built on simplistic narratives of good guys catching bad guys, the infallibility of forensic science, the presumed guilt of those accused, and the finality of justice. The production starts and ends the piece with an impossible question: What makes a person? After meeting people who survived unimaginable mental strain yet today lead happy lives, as well as learning about deep-rooted flaws in the legal system, we found comfort in the notion that human strength can survive human cruelty. As Mark Godsey's book explains with harrowing precision, self-deception and bias underlie these gross miscarriages of justice. Meeting the exonerees, Mark, and everyone involved with the OIP Rosenthal Institute for Justice opened our eyes. We hope the work helps you see better, too."

Award winner **Scott Davenport Richards** (Composer) has recently completed commissions for the Public Theater: *The Rumble of Myth* (with Marcus Gardley), and the Signature Theatre in Virginia: *The Break* (with Michele Lowe). The New York City Opera has performed two Richards works as a part of its Vox Festival of new opera: *A Star Across the Ocean—Paris 1965* featuring Chuck Cooper, and *Charlie Crosses the Nation*, An Opera in Jazz Idiom. He was commissioned by Paulette Haupt, artistic director of the O'Neill Theater Center's National Musical Theater Conference, to compose *A Thousand Words Come to Mind* (with Michele Lowe) for the inaugural set of her *Inner Voices* one-person musical monologue series. Other musical theater works include music for *Coyote Goes Salmon Fishing* (written with Deborah Brevoort, directed by Molly Smith at Perseverance Theatre/produced by Stuart Ostrow in Houston), and the original score for *A Christmas*

Story The Musical at Kansas City Rep. His play-scores have been heard at resident theaters around the country including the Yale Rep, Alliance, Center Stage, Madison Rep, Powerhouse, and New Federal. He has received a number of commissions for works for children.

Mr. Davenport taught on the faculty of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program from 1997 to 2009 and currently holds a position as professor of Composition/Musical Theatre at Montclair State University's Cali School of Music, where he has taught since 2005. He holds an MFA from New York University Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program and a BA from Yale University.

David Cote (Librettist) is a playwright, opera librettist, and arts journalist based in New York City. This season includes *Lucidity* with composer Laura Kaminsky, co-commissioned by On Site Opera and Seattle Opera. Previous operas in addition to *Blind Injustice* include *Three Way* (Nashville Opera and BAM); *The Scarlet Ibis* (Prototype Festival); and *600 Square Feet* (Cleveland Opera Theater). Cote's plays include *The Mûch*, *Saint Joe*, and *Otherland* (O'Neill National Playwrights Conference finalist). He wrote the text for Nkeiru Okoye's Black Lives Matter monodrama for baritone and orchestra, *Invitation to a Die-In*. His *Cocoa Cantata* is a modern-day sequel to Bach's *Coffee Cantata*, composed by Robert Paterson. Recordings include *Blind Injustice* (NAXOS), *Three Way* (American Modern Recordings), and *In Real Life* (AMR). Cote's TV and theater coverage appears in *The A.V. Club*, *Observer*, *4 Columns*, and *American Theatre*. He was the longest-serving theater editor and chief drama critic of *Time Out New York*. Cote is the author of popular companion books about the Broadway hits *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*, *Spring Awakening*, *Jersey Boys*, and *Wicked*. His writing has also appeared in *Opera News*, the *Village Voice*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times*. Cote is currently working on a grand opera about the artistry and activism of Paul Robeson with Scott Davenport Richards and Robin Guarino, and a monodrama with Stefan Weisman for mezzo-soprano Hai-Ting Chinn about climate change and Greenland's ice sheet.

Robin Guarino (Stage Director/Dramaturg) has directed opera, musical theater, film, and over 60 new productions, including over seven world premieres. A frequent collaborator at Lincoln Center, she has directed HD productions at the Metropolitan Opera of *Così fan tutte* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, and fully staged operas at Avery Fisher Hall and Alice Tully Hall. Guarino has directed celebrated productions at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Next Wave Festival, San Francisco Opera (HD of *Le nozze di Figaro*), Seattle Opera, Canadian Opera Company, among many others, and such distinguished young artist training programs such as the San Francisco Merola and Adler Programs, among others. Her film *Crossing the Atlantik* was featured on *Independent Focus* on PBS.

She recently directed critically acclaimed new productions of *Dialogues of the Carmelites* and *Madame Butterfly* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis; a double bill, *War Stories*, for the Philadelphia Opera Festival; *The Rake's Progress* for the San Francisco Opera Merola Program; *As One* for Cincinnati Opera; and the world premiere of *Blind Injustice* for Cincinnati Opera. She held the J. Ralph Corbett Distinguished Chair of Opera at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music from 2008 to 2020 and before that was the dramatic co-advisor of the Juilliard Opera Theater from 2004 to 2008. Guarino has a strong commitment to developing new works and supporting the work of living composers and librettists and continues that passion as artistic director of Opera Fusion: New Works, a collaboration with Cincinnati Opera, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, that has developed the following new operas and world premieres for major companies across the United States: *Intimate Apparel*, *The Hours*, *Eurydice*, *Hadrian*, *Doubt*, *Champion*, *Robeson Opera*, and *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Guarino is a judge for the Metropolitan Opera National Council and the Lotte Lenya Competition.

The Ohio Innocence Project (OIP) is a law clinic at the University of Cincinnati College of Law. Fueled by the idealism and energy of law students, OIP investigates the cases of Ohio's incarcerated who claim they are innocent and were wrongfully convicted. The OIP is one of the most active and successful innocence projects in the country and to date has secured the freedom of 42 innocent Ohioans who together served more than 900 years in prison for crimes they didn't commit.

Mark Godsey (Author, *Blind Injustice*) is the Carmichael Professor of Law and director of the Ohio Innocence Project at the University of Cincinnati College of Law. A former federal prosecutor in Manhattan, Godsey co-founded and now directs one of the most successful innocence projects in the country, which to date has secured the freedom of 42 wrongfully convicted Ohioans.

Details of MasterVoices' 2024-25 season can be found at mastervoices.org.

About MasterVoices

MasterVoices (formerly The Collegiate Chorale) was founded in 1941 by legendary American choral conductor Robert Shaw. Under the artistic direction of Tony Award winner Ted Sperling since 2013, the group is known for its versatility and a repertoire that ranges from choral masterpieces and operas in concert to operettas and musical theater. Season concerts feature a volunteer chorus of 120+ members from all walks of life alongside a diverse roster of world-class soloists from across the musical spectrum, including Mikaela Bennett, Julia Bullock, Victoria Clark, Anthony Roth Costanzo, Renée Fleming, Santino Fontana, Nathan Lane, Kelli O'Hara, Take 6, and Vanessa Williams. Under Sperling's direction the group has created cross-disciplinary collaborations with such diverse creative minds as legendary lyricist Sheldon Harnick, *Vogue* Editor-at-Large Hamish Bowles, fashion designer Zac Posen, Silk Road visual artist Kevork Mourad, illustrator Manik Choksi, stage designer Doug Fitch, and choreographers Doug Varone and Andrew Palermo. Roger Rees was the group's Artistic Associate from 2003–2015, and in 2021 the group received a New York Emmy Award nomination and a Drama League Award nomination for its multi-genre digital concert production of Adam Guettel's *Myths and Hymns*.

Known for its presentation of lesser-known artistic treasures, the group has received recent accolades for productions of rarely-heard works such as the 2023-24 season's acclaimed revival of Sondheim and Sheelove's *The Frogs*, the 2022-23 season's New York City premiere of Sheldon Harnick's full English translation of Bizet's *Carmen*, *Lady in the Dark* by Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin, Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*, the Gershwins' *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, Stephen Sondheim and Arthur Laurents's *Anyone Can Whistle*, and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*. They also commission and premiere new works; recent examples include choral works by Ricky Ian Gordon, Marisa Michelson, Tariq Al-Sabir, and Randall Eng.

As one of the country's first interracial and interfaith choruses, MasterVoices (as The Collegiate Chorale) performed at the opening of the United Nations and has sung and recorded under the batons of esteemed conductors including Serge Koussevitzky, Arturo Toscanini, and Leonard Bernstein, among others. It has been engaged by top-tier orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic and the Israel Philharmonic, and has appeared at the Verbier and Salzburg Festivals.

For more information, visit mastervoices.org. Connect with MasterVoices on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) (@mastervoicesny), and [YouTube](#).

About Ted Sperling

One of today's leading musical artists, Tony Award-winning Maestro Ted Sperling is a classically trained musician whose career has spanned from the concert hall and the opera house to the Broadway stage. Presently Artistic Director of MasterVoices, he has led such symphony orchestras as the New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Boston Pops, San Diego Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Dallas Symphony, the Iceland Symphony, Czech National Symphony, and BBC Concert Orchestra, as well as New York City Opera and Houston Grand Opera. Formerly Principal Conductor of the Westchester Philharmonic, he is a multi-faceted artist also known for his work as orchestrator, singer, pianist, violinist, violist, director, and music director.

With MasterVoices, Maestro Sperling has led acclaimed productions of rarely-heard gems as both director and conductor. These include Kurt Weill's *The Firebrand of Florence*, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *The Road of Promise* (based on *The Eternal Road* and subsequently recorded on Navona Records), and the sold-out three-performance run of *Lady in the Dark* at New York City Center. Other notable productions with the group include the acclaimed recent revival of Stephen Sondheim and Burt Shevelove's *The Frogs*, Carnegie Hall performances of Stephen Sondheim's *Anyone Can Whistle*, George and Ira Gershwin's satirical musicals *Strike Up the Band*, *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, a reconstruction of Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*, and *Song of Norway*; the New York City premieres of David Lang's *battle hymns* at the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum; and Ricky Ian Gordon's operas *The Grapes of Wrath* at Carnegie Hall and *27* at New York City Center.

During the 2020-2021 season, Maestro Sperling spearheaded a filmed production of Adam Guettel's *Myths and Hymns* for MasterVoices, producing and music directing 24 short musical films and directing roughly half of them. This project was nominated for a Drama League Award, and featured over 100 artists collaborating remotely, including Renée Fleming, Take 6, Jennifer Holliday and Julia Bullock. He has symphonic engagements in the U.S. and Europe and continues to teach at NYU, conducting three different orchestras and training the next generation of Broadway musicians and conductors.

Sperling has conducted multiple concerts for PBS's *Live From Lincoln Center*, the American Songbook Series at Lincoln Center, and the *Lyrics and Lyricists* series at the 92nd Street Y. He conducted Audra McDonald in a double bill of *La Voix Humaine* and the world premiere of *Send: Who Are You? I Love You?* at the Houston Grand Opera. He won the 2005 Tony and Drama Desk Awards for his orchestrations of Adam Guettel's *The Light in the Piazza*, for which he was also Music Director.

In addition to his directing work with MasterVoices, Mr. Sperling's work as a stage director includes the world premieres of four critically acclaimed original musicals Off-Broadway—including *The Other Josh Cohen* and *See What I Wanna See*—and a noted production of *Lady in the Dark* at the Prince Theater in Philadelphia, starring Andrea Marcovicci. He graduated *summa cum laude* from Yale University, and received the Faculty Prize at The Juilliard School. He made his Broadway stage debut as Wallace Hartley in *Titanic* and appeared as Steve Allen in the finale of Season Two of "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel."

Image: Artwork by Owen Gent

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