

Join us this summer in the boxing arena and the arena of love!

A Bellissima Opera Double-Header

July 20-21, 7pm-9:30pm (preshow at 6:30)



OUTSIDE THE RING

Words by Christine Steyer
Music by David Shenton
Directed by Christine Steyer

Louis vs. Schmeling: the 1930's boxing rivalry that defined two nations and the unlikely friendship that defined two men. A new opera from the Tales of Transcendence series.



SPEED DATING TONIGHT!

Music and Words by Michael Ching
Based on a concept by Dean Anthony
Directed by Carl Ratner

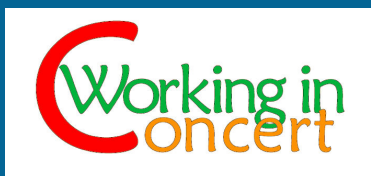
Ten hopefuls try their luck at a speed dating event. Sparks will fly and fizzle as our daters have encounters ranging from the comedic to the heartwarming.

SPECIAL THANKS

Kerri and Brian Burkhardt, Charles Brown,
Mary Cesar, Aaron Grace, Judy Gaietto Grace,
Nicole and Russell Hoke, Claudia Hommel,
Susan Huizinga, Cappy Kidd,
Jeffrey Skender and Concordia University

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WELCOME to BELLISSIMA OPERA's 2024 SUMMER DOUBLE-HEADER

Artistic Director Christine Steyer and I are pleased to welcome you to tonight's Double Bill! The excerpts from *Outside the Ring* showcase the next entry in our Transcendence Series, celebrating individuals and groups who have transcended the human divide. We hope you will enjoy the beginning of this story of the triumph of friendship over rivalry and racism.

We have also had a wonderful time putting together Michael Ching's funny and moving opera, *Speed Dating Tonight!* I say "putting together" because the opera is assembled from a large number of pieces that Michael Ching wrote for over 130 productions that the work has already received. We were able to select the individual songs and duets that best suit our cast of talented Chicago-area artists.

And special thanks to all the children and students appearing in tonight's production and their devoted parents! It has been a joy working with them.

This double bill really proves the resilience and yearning for connection that are inherent parts of the human spirit.

Have a nice evening! ~Carl Ratner, Associate Artistic Director

Outside the Ring - excerpts from Act I

An Opera from The Transcendence Series
The boxers Joe Louis & Max Schmeling rivalry
that defined two nations
& the friendship that defined two men

Libretto by Christine Steyer Score by David Shenton

CONDUCTOR Brian Burkhardt

PIANIST Peter Stigdon

CAST

Christine Steyer	Ensemble	Narrator
Paul Geiger	Clem McCarthy	American Broadcaster
Bill McMurray	Joe Louis	American Boxer
Ryan de Ryke	Max Schmeling	German Boxer
Emily Mwila	Lillie Barrow	Louis' Mother
Dorian McCall	Jack Blackburn	Louis' Trainer
Elizabeth Fisher	Anny Ondra	Schmeling's Wife
Brian Pember	Joseph Goebbels	German Propaganda Minister
Jules Furgal	Magda Goebbels	Goebbels' Wife
Amanda Thomas	Lucille Armistead	Friend of Louis
Christina Ray	Magda	Goebbels' Housekeeper
Carl Ratner	Joe Jacobs	Schmeling's Manager
Paul Geiger	Ludwig Haymann	German Propaganda Office
Russell Hoke	Ensemble	German Impresario
Maia Surace	Lida Baarova	Goebbels' Mistress
Aaron Grace	Ensemble	German Photographer

Ensemble

Nicole Cooper-Hoke, Judy Grace, Garrett Johanssen,
Olga Saad Karam and Suzanne Walsh

Youths as various characters

Esmeralda Garcia Huicochea, Agatha Gillespie, Elise Gillespie,
Hugo Gillespie, Emelie Gutierrez, Lorena Izquierdo,
Caleb Reed-Jennings, Shiloh Jennings, Gwenna Kelley,
Andrew Labno, Sophia Labno, Gabriela Lufrano, Lucas Madrigal,
Marty O'Connor, Erin Tybor and Clara Wilkens

Artistic Director's Note

Outside the Ring deals with strong subject matter. The extraordinary friendship between the two boxers cannot be truly understood if the ugly truth about racism in 1930 Nazi Germany and the US is not shown. Our youth cast engaged in a talk about so that they understood the context in which certain words in the story were used.

Synopsis of Act I

PROLOGUE 1954, Chicago, South Side. Schmeling approaches Louis' home.

SCENE I July 17, 1936 Evening of the first fight. Yankee Stadium and Harlem, NY and the Goebbels Residence, Berlin

A crowd files into Yankee Stadium as Louis and Schmeling are in final preparations. Louis is visited by his mother. Schmeling has a call with his wife who is at the Berlin residence of Joseph Goebbels.

American and German sports announcers give details of the fight as all listen in.

Scene II An hour later: Harlem
Children reenact the fight in Round 4 when Louis gets knocked down. A boy sobs.

Isolating himself from the press, an injured Louis, accompanied by his trainer Blackburn, arrive at their mutual friend's place. Louis tries to comfort the boy, but the boy recognizes him and insults him.

Blackburn expresses his anger towards Louis for breaking training and being in poor condition. Louis reflects on losing a fight for the first time.

Act I Scene III A week later: Berlin

Goebbels throws a party with Schmeling as guest of honor. Men from the German Office of Propaganda carefully observe Schmeling engage the others. The Goebbels children enter for a propaganda photo.

Schmeling is asked to explain why he was so certain he would defeat Louis when the odds were heavily against him. He explains that his trainer obtained films of Louis' fights, and they discovered a flaw in Louis' technique. However, his words become twisted to appear he believes the flaw to be Louis' race.

Goebbels' wife pulls Anny aside and inquires as to how she can be of service to Germany. In private, Schmeling and Anny express uneasiness at the evening's events.

Goebbels expresses the Führer's distaste for degenerate art. He unveils the vision for the new capital called 'Germania' - a city that will last for 1,000 years.

Magda and an official enter with a document outlining the Nazi party's views on race.

End of Act I

The story to be continued as funding is secured...

For Speed Dating Tonight!, see back inside cover

CAST AND TEAM



Row 1: Christine Steyer, Carl Ratner, David Shenton, Michael Ching, Peter Stigdon, Brian Burkhardt, Ryan de Ryke

Row 2: Bill McMurray, Elizabeth Fisher, Emily Mwila, Brian Pember, Jules Furgal, Dorian McCall, Paul Geiger

Row 3: Nicole Cooper-Hoke, Russell Hoke, Garrett Johannsen, Maia Surace, Olga Saad Karam, Christina Ray

Row 4: Amanda Thomas, Suzanne Walsh, Judy Gaietto-Grace, Aaron Grace, Nick Sandys, Kerri Burkhardt, Emil Clausing

Row 5: Giau Truong, Dan Perkins, Laura Rodriguez, Kimberly Huizinga, Claudia Hommel, Cappy Kidd, Katie Rub

BIOS

Christine Steyer (Artistic Director of Bellissima Opera; *Outside the Ring* Librettist, Director, Narrator; *Speed Dating Tonight!* Dancer, UFO Watcher Dater) is the 2020 Honored Artist of the American Prize for outstanding contributions to the arts. The soprano has received acclaim for her portrayals of Madame Butterfly and Violetta, and has sung in 40 productions at Lyric Opera of Chicago. She recently shared the stage with Lawrence Brownlee, members of the Chicago Symphony and Lyric Opera of Chicago Orchestras, and was featured on WFMT's program *Music Notes: Music of Healing and Peace*. Steyer is an avid recitalist and producer, showcasing unique works by contemporary and women poets and composers. In 2021, she premiered the role of the Rio de Janeiro Health Care Worker in *On Call: COVID-19* and in 2022 premiered the role of Flanna in *Future Perfect*. Steyer served as librettist for these award-winning operas. Steyer has brought music to 24,000 youths in underserved areas with Bellissima Opera's In the Classroom. She is Co-Founder of the vocal alliance Working in Concert, and Artistic Director of its Bellissima Opera initiative. Christine is on the music faculty at Concordia University and teaches music at Ascension Catholic School in Oak Park. She is thrilled to share her deep love of music with a new generation of young people. She lives in Oak Park with her husband Paul and their beloved rescue dog Huckleberry. In her free time, she loves to garden, paint and travel around the world.

Carl Ratner (President of Working In Concert, Associate Artistic Director of Bellissima Opera; *Outside the Ring* Joe Jacobs (Schmeling's Manager); *Speed Dating Tonight!* Stage Director, Bar Regular) began his career assisting directors at the world's major opera houses, including Covent Garden in London, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Munich Opera, the Spoleto Festival in Italy, and Lyric Opera of Chicago, among others. He served as Artistic Director of Chicago Opera Theater (1994-1999) and Chamber Opera Chicago (1985-1993). An accomplished baritone, he has portrayed the title roles in Verdi's *Falstaff*, Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, and Britten's *Noye's Fludde*, as well as Papageno in *The Magic Flute*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, and the leading baritone roles in *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*. A frequent soloist in oratorio and recital, he has performed Handel's *Messiah*, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and many other concert works. He has sung in 14 languages and has performed in 7 countries, 10 states, and the District of Columbia. He created the role of Oxóssi in the world premiere of *Future Perfect* and directed and created the role of the Lebanon Health Care Worker in the world premiere of *On Call: COVID-19* for Bellissima Opera. He recently directed Verdi's *La Traviata* and performed the role of the Doctor for South Bend Lyric Opera. He studied at Oberlin, Northeastern Illinois University, Northwestern, Juilliard, and the Saint Petersburg Conservatory in Russia through a Fulbright grant. He retired from his position as Co-Chair of Voice and Director of Opera at Western Michigan University in 2023.

David Shenton (*Outside the Ring* Composer) is an English pianist, violinist, composer, and arranger, based in New York. Shenton has collaborated with musicians in diverse genres, including Vanessa Williams, Tony Bennett, Sierra Boggess, Denyce Graves, Renée Fleming, Sherrill Milnes, Sir André Previn, Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz. Composing since the age of nine, Shenton has written hundreds of works including sonatas, concerti, a symphony, an oratorio, string quartets, numerous songs, instrumental works, and operas. Shenton's career includes conducting his orchestra/big band at Carnegie Hall in 2014; Jazz@Lincoln Center Rose Theater as a jazz pianist in 2008; classical piano at Lincoln Center's Rubenstein Atrium for the 200th anniversary Schumann and Chopin celebration; and as music director/arranger/pianist for the Center's 100th Anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. A prolific arranger, Shenton has worked at Abbey Road and CTS Studios (London), on Hollywood movies, and Broadway shows. Shenton has co-created more than a dozen shows with lyricist Martin

Charnin (*Annie*). He arranged and orchestrated for the long-running West End production of Howard Blake's *The Snowman*, for Charnin's last musical, *Robin Hood: The Untold Story*, and for *Opus X*, with trumpeter Chris Botti. Shenton has composed numerous art songs and collaborated with Christine Steyer on *Six Songs for Soprano* as well as two other operas from their Tales of Transcendence series, *On Call: COVID-19* and *Future Perfect*. As a coach, accompanist, and teaching professor, David has been on the faculties of NYU, The New School, The Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute, Mannes College of Music, St. Thomas Choir School and Grace Church School. His catalog of some 45 recordings can be found on various record labels including Steinway & Sons and Vocalion.

Michael Ching (*Speed Dating Tonight!* Composer) is an American composer, conductor, and music administrator. A prolific and eclectic composer, he is best known nationally as the composer of innovative operas, including his *a cappella* adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2011). His other major operas include *Buoso's Ghost* (1996), *Corps of Discovery* (2003), *Slaying the Dragon* (2012), *Speed Dating Tonight!* (2013), and *Alice Ryley* (2015). He has written the librettos for all of his operas composed after 2012. *Buoso's Ghost* has recently been performed at Florida Grand Opera, Detroit Opera, and Opera Delaware. Recent university productions include Montclair State University and California State University at Fullerton. *Speed Dating Tonight!* has been performed over 120 times since its premiere at the Janiec Opera at the Brevard Music Festival. EC Schirmer has recently published Michael's *Arrangements and Derangements of Schubert*, which was commissioned by the ARK Trio and recorded on Navona Records. Michael's other operatic projects include *Completing the Picture*, *Dinner 4 3* (with librettist Deborah Brevoort), *Eight Woods and a Van*, *Anna Hunter*, *Birthday Clown*, *Royal Feast*, *RSBE*, and *Thrivers*. Michael is the opera and art song consultant at E.C. Schirmer and Galaxy Music. He is on the board of directors of the National Opera Association and for 18 years was Artistic Director of Opera Memphis.

Peter Stigdon (*Outside the Ring* Pianist; *Speed Dating Tonight!* Pianist, Crush Apples Dater) is an Oak Park based multi-instrumentalist. He received a BA in Music from Concordia University, where he currently directs Männerchor, the University men's choir. Peter is also the Worship Coordinator and Music Director at Trinity Lutheran Church in Roselle, IL and Harpist with the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest. This is his second production with Bellissima Opera, having been rehearsal accompanist and appearing as "Kai" in *Future Perfect*.

Brian Burkhardt (Conductor) earned a Bachelor of Music degree in Vocal and Instrumental Music Education from Luther College and a Master of Arts degree in Vocal Performance and Conducting from the University of Iowa. He is currently the director of Vocal Music at Clear Creek Amana schools and has conducted Chamber Opera Chicago productions of *The Sound of Music* and the children's chorus for numerous productions of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Also an active performer, he has performed with Chamber Opera Chicago as Charles in the original musical adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* throughout its eight tours of the UK and Canada and in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. He has also sung with the Cedar Rapids Opera, University of Iowa Opera Theater, and Dorian Opera, where his roles have included Bill/*The Telephone*, Bob/*Old Maid and the Thief*, Masetto/*Don Giovanni*, Guglielmo/*Così fan tutte*, Belcore/*Elixir of Love*, Luiz/*The Grondoliers*, Alfio/*Cavalleria rusticana*, Demetrius/*Midsummer Night's Dream*, Morales/*Carmen*, Prince/*Goose Girl*, and Marquis d'Obigny/*La Traviata*. He has also soloed with the AIMS Festival Orchestra in Graz, Austria, Cedar Rapids Symphony, Southeast Iowa Symphony, and the UI Symphony and Choruses.

Baritone **Ryan de Ryke** (*Outside the Ring* Max Schmeling (German Boxer); *Speed Dating Tonight!* OMG Happy Birthday Dater) is an artist whose versatility and unique musical presence have made him increasingly in demand on both sides of the Atlantic. He has performed at many of the leading international music festivals including the Aldeburgh and Edinburgh Festivals in the UK and the summer festival at Aix-en-Provence in France garnering significant acclaim as both a recitalist and singing actor. Ryan studied at the Peabody Conservatory with John Shirley Quirk, the Royal Academy of Music in London with Ian Partridge, and at the National Conservatory of Luxembourg with Georges Backes. He is also an alumnus of the Britten-Pears Institute in the UK and the Schubert Institute in Austria where he worked with great artists of the song world such as Elly Ameling, Wolfgang Holzmair, Julius Drake, Rudolf Jansen, and Helmut Deutsch. Although Ryan's first love is song, he is also known for his work in the Early Music community. His performances with Haymarket Opera have been heralded by the Chicago Tribune among their top 5 list. Ryan is also an accomplished recording artist who rose to attention with his first CD, "A Wanderer's Guitar," on which he collaborates with guitarist Brandon Acker to present Schubert songs. He also appears on the CD "Final Fantasy, Distant Worlds," conducted by Arnie Roth of Mannheim Steamroller. During the pandemic, Ryan starred as the eponymous role in a film of Handel's *Apollo and Dafne*, which was streamed by The Metropolitan Opera and The Royal Opera House Covent Garden. Ryan is particularly proud of his latest CD released by Naxos with pianist Eva Mengelkoch including songs by Albrecht Mendelssohn. The American Record Guide hails his "warm and expressive" singing while Fanfare declares that *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* "fits the baritone like a glove".

Baritone **Bill McMurray** (*Outside the Ring* Joe Louis (American boxer); *Speed Dating Tonight!* Car Man, Ex Duet Dater) has been described as "a baritone with warm, rich tones and superb stage presence". He has more than forty operatic roles to his credit, including Figaro in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Count Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro*, and Escamillo in *Carmen*. As Marcello in *La Bohème*, Walter Marini of the New Buffalo Times described him as "a powerful actor who brings great elegance to the role. His singing is as fine as anything being heard in major opera houses today." He has sung with noted companies like Florida Grand Opera, Opera North, Knoxville Opera, Skylight Music Theater, Opera Company of NC, Mobile Opera, Opera Carolina, Central City Opera and Opera on the James. Recent engagements include his return to Chicago Opera Theater to perform the role of Mr. Gedge in *Albert Herring*, Marullo in *Rigoletto* and Pirate King in *Pirates of Penzance* with Opera San Antonio, Ebn-Chakia in Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*, Father in the Midwest premiere of Stefan Weisman's *The Scarlet Ibis*, and the Narrator in *The Snowman* with the Illinois Philharmonic. Equally at home on the concert stage, his solo highlights include a *Porgy and Bess* concert, as well as performances of the *Messiah* with Michigan City and the Apollo Chorus, the Mozart *Requiem* with the Chicago Bar Association, and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* with South Bend Symphony and the Illinois Philharmonic. At the Ravinia Festival he was the bass soloist in Haydn's *Creation*, conducted by James Levine. He was a first place winner of the National Association Teachers of Singing competition and was one of eight singers selected to the Winners Circle of the Classical Music Vocal Competition.

Elizabeth Fisher (*Outside the Ring* Annie Ondra (Schmeling's wife); *Speed Dating Tonight!* Fragile Woman Dater) praised for her attractive voice and unique timbre, is a rising young soprano in the Chicago opera scene. Recently she made her company debut with the Gilbert and

Sullivan Opera Company of Chicago, playing the role of Ruth and covering Rose in their production of *Ruddigore*. As a young artist, Ms. Fisher has performed with Folks Operetta, Candlelight Concerts, Utah Festival Opera, Opera in the Ozarks, and Florida State University, and her recent credits include Lucia (*Lucia di Lammermoor*), Mabel (*Pirates of Penzance*), Frasquita (*Carmen*), and Pamina (*The Magic Flute*). Ms. Fisher has received awards and recognition from the Michael Ballam Vocal Competition, the Pasadena Vocal Competition, and the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition.

Emily Mwila (*Outside the Ring* Lillie Barrow (Louis' mother); *Speed Dating Tonight!* Adjust to the Times Dater) is a New Zealand-born soprano currently based in Chicago. She was part of the original revival cast of Anthony Davis' *The Life and Times of Malcolm X* with Detroit Opera, Omaha Opera, and the Metropolitan Opera. In 2021, she appeared in the chorus of *Porgy and Bess* at the Metropolitan Opera. She made her Lyric Opera of Chicago debut singing the role of Evelyn/*Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2021/22) and has subsequently sung Lucia Paret/*Champion* (2023/24) and been the soprano soloist in Lyric Opera's concert performance of Mozart's *Thamos, King of Egypt* (23/24). She made her operatic debut in New Zealand at Eternity Opera (Zerlina/*Don Giovanni*), and other roles include Susanna/*Le Nozze di Figaro*, Mae Jones/*Street Scene*, and Euridice/*Orfeo ed Euridice*. Mwila received a Master of Music and Professional Studies Diploma in Voice from Mannes School of Music in New York.

Brian Pember (Joseph Goebbels, German Minister of Propaganda) is delighted to return to Bellissima Opera for this exciting Double-Header performance, having previously performed as Leggo in *Future Perfect*. Brian is an alumnus of Westminster Choir College ('17) where they studied with Charles Walker. They most recently appeared onstage as a guest artist at NEIU in their production of *The Grand Duchess of Gérolstein* (Fritz). They also recently appeared on the art song performance *Present Musings*, which is still available on YouTube. Other credits include Evanston Chamber Opera's *The Chalet* (Daniel), Thompson Street Opera Company's *We've Got Our Eye on You*, *Michigan Trees* (Mother of Trees), and *The Boy Who Wanted to be a Robot* (Cleano), Chicago Opera Theater's *The Nose*, *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing*, *Quamino's Map*, and *Moby Dick*, and the Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Company of Chicago's *Pirates of Penzance* (Frederic). Look out for Brian this fall in *The Pure and the Impure* with Working in Concert!

Mezzo-soprano **Jules Furgal** (*Outside the Ring* Magda Goebbels (Goebbels' wife); *Speed Dating Tonight!* Waitress) recently graduated from DePaul University with a Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance under the instruction of Linda DiFiore. They have been seen as a concert soloist with the DePaul Concert Choir numerous times, and was recently featured on DePaul Concert Orchestra's concert as a soloist singing Composer's Aria. Opera credits include ensemble in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and Laura in Weill's *Street Scene* with DePaul Opera Theatre. In summer of 2023, Jules studied the Italian language and Italian opera in Urbino, Italy with Musica Nelle Marche. There, they were an active participant in the scenes program, performing the roles of Meg Page (*Falstaff*), Isabella (*L'Italiana in Algeri*), Cherubino (*Le Nozze di Figaro*) and the titular role in *Cenerentola*. Jules is also fluent in Polish and is studying German. Jules greatly enjoys studying music by Polish composers to further connect with their Polish Heritage. Alongside this, Jules also prioritizes learning music by BIPOC and women composers and strives to continue working to make classical music a more equitable space for all. In the past, Jules has attended workshops including Global Musician's Workshop studying folk music from around the world, and Natalie Weiss' Musical Theatre Masterclass for Classical Singers. Jules hopes to establish themselves as a multi-faceted musician who creates art that connects to audiences of all ages.

Bass-baritone **Dorian McCall** (*Outside the Ring* Jack Blackburn (Louis' Trainer); *Speed Dating Tonight!* Bartender) has been mentioned by the New York Times for "his rich lows" and by Musical America as "[benefitting] from his freely produced bass-baritone and his winning stage presence." Noted for his vibrant and robust timbre, the dexterity of McCall's instrument also lends itself well to Baroque and Bel Canto. Hot on the heels of a charged reception at Teatro Nuovo as Fabrizio in Ricci's *Crispino e la comare*, this season included Haymarket Opera's production of *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina*, Gilbert and Sullivan of Chicago's *Ruddigore*, and Cedar Rapids Opera as Resident Teaching Artist as well as a premiere on their stage as Angelotti in Puccini's *Tosca*. Concert work included Chicago Chamber Choir as soloist for Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem* and a debut with Handel Choir of Baltimore (*Messiah*) YouTube: @finally_Dorian. Last season, McCall performed with Haymarket Opera as comprimari in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, workshopped an opera premier with Chicago Fringe Opera, and debuted with UIC Choirs as a soloist for Handel's *Messiah*. Spring had surprise debuts with Music of the Baroque as a soloist for Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and Big Spring Symphony for a concert celebrating their 50th season as well as placing 2nd in the Classical Young Artist/Emerging Pro division of the Classical Singer Vocal Competition.

Bass **Paul Geiger** (*Outside the Ring* Clem McCarthy (American Broadcaster), Ludwig Haymann (German Propaganda Office) sang the title roles in *Marriage of Figaro* and *Turk in Italy*, Belcore in *Elixir of Love* and Mustafa in *Italian Girl in Algiers* with Chicago Opera Theater, as well as Olin Blich in *Susannah*, the Four Villains in *The Tales of Hoffman*, and the title role in *Sweeney Todd* with Des Moines Metro Opera. Other career highlights include Jokanaan in *Salome* with Palm Beach Opera and Hobson in *Peter Grimes* with Lyric Opera of Chicago and San Francisco Opera. He has recently performed as Germont in *La Traviata* and Sharpless in *Madama Butterfly* with Bellissima Opera, Reverend Hale in *The Crucible* with Chamber Opera Chicago, the roles of both the Notary and Commissioner in *Der Rosenkavalier* with Sinfonia da Camera, and Admiral Croft and Major Domo in a new musical adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* with Chamber Opera Chicago, which has toured internationally in the UK, Canada, and New York City.

Soprano **Nicole Cooper-Hoke** (*Outside the Ring* Ensemble; *Speed Dating Tonight!* Cell Phone Dater) is a winner of multiple vocal competitions. She was a national finalist for Lyric Opera Theater where she made it to the top 8 and competed at Carnegie Hall. Last summer, she debuted as Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* in Urbania, Italy with Fio Opera Festival. She performed on six international tours throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Canada in a musical adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* with Chamber Opera Chicago, and played Mimi in *La Bohème* with Mi Opera, the Witch in *Into the Woods*, and Geraldine in *A Hand of Bridge* with Floating Opera. She made her debut at Verismo Opera as Annina in *La Traviata*. Other roles include the cover for the Mother in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a nun in *The Sound of Music*, the Sandman in *Hansel and Gretel*, and a soloist in *Te Amo: A Night of Spanish Music* and *Maria la O*, all with Chamber Opera Chicago. She has also performed with Da Corneto Opera in *Aida*, for Williamstown College in Massachusetts as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and as the cover for the Mother in *Amahl and the Night Visitors* with You Gotta Hear This!, which she performed at a publicity event

in New York. She has also appeared with Taconic Opera as Contessa Ceprano in *Rigoletto*. Past operatic performances include Amelia in *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, Miriam from *The Scarf* by Lee Hoiby, and Papagena (cover) in *The Magic Flute*. She was also the first place winner in the emerging artist division of Elgin Opera's fourth Annual Vocal Competition as well as the Mendelssohn Club Competition in New York. She obtained her BM from SUNY Purchase in New York and her graduate degree in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy from Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. Nicole is originally from New York and currently resides in Chicago.

Russell Hoke (*Outside the Ring* German Impresario/Ensemble; *Speed Dating Tonight!* Cell Phone Dater) is a Chicago based baritone who is known for his biting tone and warmly colored voice. Having begun his voice study after 30, it has been a very untraditional path into the operatic field. His voice is uniquely suited for the larger and darker roles of Verdi and Wagner, and there is nothing he likes more than singing a villain. Russell made his debut with Bellissima opera in their award-winning online production of *On Call: COVID-19*, where he originated the role of Mario Suffice, NYFD Paramedic. Russell was recently a member of the Cedar Rapids Opera Young Artist Program.

Garrett Johannsen (*Outside the Ring* Ensemble; *Speed Dating Tonight!* Fragile Man Dater) is a classically trained tenor from Schiller Park, Illinois. He graduated from the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. Recent career highlights include Jane Austen's *Persuasion* UK Tours with Chamber Opera Chicago, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus at Carnegie Hall, *Nederlander* Centennial Medley Soloist at Jay Pritzker Pavilion, and a recording collaboration with James Stephenson's *As The Fireflies Watched* as tenor soloist. He has performed with the Lyric Opera, Chicago Symphony and Grant Park Choruses, Chicago a cappella, Bella Voce, Music of the Baroque, the William Ferris Chorale and contemporary ensemble Stare at the Sun. Along with having performed in many operas, recitals, cabarets and city-wide events, Garrett is honored to have sung the national anthem at Wrigley Field, Guaranteed Rate Field, Toyota Park and Soldiers Field. Garrett is a member of the American Guild of Musical Artists.

Mezzo-soprano **Maia Surace** (*Outside the Ring* Ensemble; *Speed Dating Tonight!* Talkative Woman, Ex Duet Dater) lives and sings in the Chicago area. Currently, she serves as the cantor soloist for St. Luke's Lutheran Church and Sinai Congregation. She is employed as a regular chorister at Lyric Opera of Chicago. She recently received an Emmy Award for her participation in Lyric Opera's production of *Pagliacci*. Upcoming performances include concerts with the International Music Foundation and Opera in the Gardens with Indiana Friendship Gardens.

Olga Saad Karam (*Outside the Ring* Ensemble; *Speed Dating Tonight!* Dating Coordinator, Cat Lady Dater) continues to excite audiences, proving she is a multifaceted performer in the operatic and music theater repertoires; a performer who plays her roles "with consummate grace" (Larry L. Kubert for the Lincoln Journal Star). Olga has performed with the AIMS Orchestra in Graz, Austria, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Symphony, and Lincoln Symphony Orchestra. Ms. Saad worked with Sherwood Conservatory at Columbia College and Chicago Lyric Opera to create the Opera Kids outreach program. Currently, Olga teaches voice with Beyond the Stars Performing Arts in Willowbrook, IL, and Tracey Ford Voice Studio in Western Springs, IL. Originally from Wichita, KS, Ms. Saad received her B.M. from Friends University and M.M. in Voice and Opera performance at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Olga sang with the AIMS Opera Studio in Graz, Austria. As a Young Artist in Wichita Grand Opera, she covered Liu (*Turandot*), Stephano (*Romeo et Juliette*) and Violetta (*La Traviata*), and has shared the stage with Sam Ramey, Annalisa Raspagliosi, and Christina Nassif. Past performances include (Sandy) *Grease!*, (Lily) *The Secret Garden*, (Mrs. Astor) *Titanic*, (Belle) Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, (Pamina) *The Magic Flute*, (Johanna) *Sweeney Todd*, Susanna (*Le Nozze di Figaro*) in Rome, Italy, and Adina (*The Elixir of Love*). Olga had the honor of debuting *The Burnt-Part Boys* by Nathan Tysen and Chris Miller and appeared in the Chicago premiere of *Pride and Prejudice, the Musical*.

Christina Ray (*Outside the Ring* Goebbels' Housekeeper/Ensemble) has a degree in Music from Concordia University Chicago and studies voice with Christine Steyer. Classically trained, Christina cantors at services/Masses on weekends as well as directs the Handbell Choir at her local church. She has also been a choir member of Oak Park Community Choir and the Kapelle at Concordia University Chicago as well as performed in recitals as a soloist. Aside from her musical passion, she works as an IT Technician at CUC and holds an undergraduate degree in Information Systems Security as well as an MBA specializing in IT Management graduate degree.

Amanda M. Thomas (*Outside the Ring* Lucille Armistead/Ensemble) is joining Bellissima Opera for her first season. A mezzo-soprano from the Chicagoland area, she is a sought after soloist, vocal teacher, and choral conductor. Her theater credits include Third Lady in W.A. Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Katisha in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, Miss Todd in scenes from Menotti's *Old Maid and the Thief*, and Marcellina in scenes from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Amanda wishes to thank Christine Steyer for giving her the opportunity to participate with this amazing cast.

Suzanne Walsh (*Outside the Ring* Ensemble) is a native Oak Parker who began studying voice in college and has worked with teachers who have graduate degrees from Northwestern University, Northeastern Illinois University, and Concordia University. She currently studies with Christine Steyer. Suzanne sang as a member of the chorus in the world premiere of Belissima Opera's *COVID-19* opera in 2021 and premiered the role of Verbena in Belissima's *Future Perfect* in 2022.

Judy Gaietto-Grace (*Outside the Ring* Ensemble) has enjoyed singing since her teens. In high school, she was in chorus and she has sung in Unity Temple UUC's choir for over 25 years. Her singing has improved greatly since taking voice lessons from Christine Steyer, and she is thrilled to be singing in her first opera!

Aaron Grace (*Outside the Ring* Ensemble) loves music! In his lifetime, he has played the violin and the electric and double bass. He played in the Triton band and in an independent quartet. His focus now is on singing, and he has sung and been a soloist in the Unity Temple UUC choir. He is very excited to be performing in his first opera, and he is grateful to Christine for her excellent voice training!

Nick Sandys (Stage Combat Consultant) holds the rank of Fight Master with The Society of American Fight Directors and has been adjunct faculty at the Theatre School at DePaul University for 30 years. He is a Resident Fight Director at Lyric Opera of Chicago where he has contributed to over 70 productions, most recently *Carmen*, *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, and *Pagliacci*. Other recent Chicagoland combat credits

include: *Midnight In The Garden Of Good And Evil*, *Swing State*, *Clyde's*, and *Gem of the Ocean* (Goodman); *Red Summer* (MPAACT); *Zorro*, *The Producers*, *Ragtime* (Music Theater Works); *Ascension*, *Good Grief*, *Henry IV* (The Theatre School @ DePaul) . His fights have also appeared regionally, in Toronto, Canada, and in New York City--*Prince Igor*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Il Trovatore* (Metropolitan Opera); *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Steppenwolf, Broadway); *Swing State* (Goodman @ Minetta Lane). His combat choreography has received 4 Joseph Jefferson Nominations and one Award. Nick is also an actor (currently performing in *Peter & The Starcatcher* at Paramount Theater), audiobook narrator, and director, having recently directed Strauss' *Elektra* (Dallas Opera), *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (The Theatre School), *Shaw vs. Tunney* (Grippo Stage), and *Future Perfect* (Bellissima Opera). www.nicksandys.com

Kerri Rosenberg Burkhardt (Bellissima Opera Artistic Administrator, Working In Concert Business Manager) received her B.A. and M.A. in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Iowa, where she also completed coursework for the Doctorate of Musical Arts. She sang with the Zurich International Opera Studio in Switzerland, the Zurich Opera (where she performed with conductors such as Nello Santi and Nikolaus Harnoncourt), Muddy River Opera, and Iowa Opera Theater, among others, where her favorite roles included Nedda/*I Pagliacci*, Mimi/*La Boheme*, Marenka/*The Bartered Bride*, Blanche and Constance in different productions of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, Felice/*Die vier Grobiane*, Adina/*L'Elisir d'Amore*, Zerlina/*Don Giovanni*, Helena/*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Frasquita/*Carmen*, Casilda/*The Gondoliers*, and Mabel/*Pirates of Penzance*. She has also soloed with symphonies and choruses throughout the United States and Europe and has performed in recital with Simon Estes and on national television as a finalist in the Miss America Pageant. As the Artistic Administrator for Chamber Opera Tours, she has been instrumental in arranging tours of a new musical adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* to England, Scotland (including the prestigious Edinburgh Fringe Festival), Wales, Canada, and NYC. Kerri was also the Director of Auditions and Admissions for the American Institute of Musical Studies (AIMS) in Graz, Austria for 14 years. She and her husband, Brian, are the proud parents of Brandon and Karissa Burkhardt.

Emil "Em" Clausing (Stage Manager) Chicago, IL - B.A. Concordia University Chicago '22, is a theatre artist and storyteller. Em made their first contribution to local theatre and opera with Bellissima Opera's collaboration with Working in Concert on *Future Perfect*. Since then, they have worked in various production roles, including sound design for *The Moment* at Madison Street Theater, direction for *Steel Magnolias* with The Artists of Concordia Theatre, and as playwright of *We Going to Mercy* at First Run Theatre. Em has extensive experience in stage management, having taken on numerous projects in this capacity. They are thrilled to be rejoining the Bellissima Opera artistic team once again! IG: @em.cinnamon--

Giau Minh Truong (Lighting Designer and Projections) was born in Vietnam and lived in a refugee camp with his family for two years in Indonesia before arriving in the USA in 1982. He studied film at Columbia College and has conceptualized, acted, and directed numerous shows/events throughout the United States. Giau is currently the Tech Director and Associate Curator for Links Hall, where he oversees their production and technical needs for artists and performances, maintains Studio A performance space, and does curatorial work focusing on developing use of tech in performance.

Dan Perkins (Boxing Consultant) is an independent consultant and thought leader who specializes in facilitating mission-aligned outcomes that enhance brand preference, trust, and engagement. He works with clients in both the public and private sectors and has recently completed assignments that have yielded effective supplier diversity programs in higher education, energy, and healthcare. Dan is also a cultural historian with an extensive collection of ephemera highlighting intersections between boxing, the military, and fights for equality and justice in America and beyond from 1890 through 1929. He frequently conducts presentations to illuminate the positive and transformative role of boxing in American culture.

Laura Rodriguez (Hair/Makeup) has many years of hair and makeup experience. Creating beauty has been her life-long passion. She is excited to help to transform everyone into their 1936 characters.

Kimberly Huizinga (Costume Assistant) has spent many years involved in theater in the audience, onstage, and occasionally backstage. She loves watching a show comes together — not by magic, but by the hard work of the cast and crew.

Claudia Hommel (Executive Director and Treasurer of Working In Concert) directs the Chicago Paris Cabaret Connexion, SongShop workshops and concert productions. Claudia received her Master's in Library Science from Wayne State University and founded the archives of the Detroit Institute of Arts prior to pursuing a full-time career on stage, first in New York City, then Chicago. Actor-singer, teacher, cabaret promoter, Claudia brings her personal connections and passions to Working In Concert. Her recordings of *Paris/Paree*, *Paris in the Jazz Age*, *Romance Language: French Songs for Lovers*, and the two *Jazz Fauré Project* albums are a reflection of her Paris-centric repertoire. The Vocal Canvas concerts bring projections to the recital stage to "hear the painting and see the song". She is on faculty at the Community Music Division of DePaul University School of Music with SongShop, her ongoing class in song interpretation. She initiated the founding of Chicago Cabaret Professionals in 1997 and is a coordinator for the annual Chicago Cabaret Week, launched in 2022.

Cappy Kidd (Secretary of the Working In Concert Board/extra in this production) is the go-to person for fund-raising, outreach and logistics for Working In Concert. Cappy was principal of Informed Energy Decisions, an environmental services and engineering consulting firm. As a certified energy manager and independent consultant, he advised commercial and institutional building owners and managers, including supervising LED lighting retrofitting. In recognition of his contributions to improving building energy performance, he was inducted into the Environmental Hall of Fame and received an Energy Star leadership award for work at the Great Lakes Naval Training. Read his *Energy Detective* stories at www.energydetectives.com

Katie Rub (Working In Concert Executive Assistant) played the key role of Paloma in the 2022 opera production *Future Perfect*. As executive assistant, she brings several years of experience as performer in musical theatre, stage plays and operas, directing and costume design, production assistance, and more. She shares her many administrative and technical talents with Elgin Community College, where she is a part-time events coordinator for the Performing Arts Center.

OUR YOUTH CAST!



Back Row: Emilie, Shiloh, Caleb

Middle Row: Marty, Gwenna, Sophie, Elise, Andrew, Lucas

Front Row: Erin, Gabriela, Clara, Lorena, Esmerelda, Hugo, Agatha

Agatha Gillespie LOVES music, dance, and acting. She recently performed the Aretha Franklin show at FitzGerald's and Robert's Westside with her School of Rock Band. She sings lead vocals, backup vocals, and also plays keys. She takes violin lessons and performed with Ovation Academy last fall. She loves all music, especially pop and musicals. She can't wait!

Elise Gillespie loves to perform and has been choreographing her two younger siblings, Hugo and Agatha, to their favorite tunes for years. She also plays violin and loves an energetic late night dance party before bed.

Hugo Gillespie loves to reenact scenes from Disney's *Descendants* with his older sisters, Elise and Agatha, who are also in this production. He plays piano and sings his heart out to his favorite songs from the back seat on family road trips.

Emelie Gutierrez is 15 years old and a Sophomore at East Leyden High School. She is a member of her school's marching band, symphonic band, jazz band, pep band and various extracurricular choirs. She plays tenor and bari saxophone, clarinet and flute, and is a member of the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic Youth Ensemble. She has also studied ballet, tap, poms, and hip hop for nine years. Previous musicals include *Newsies Jr.* as Nancy and Betsy, *Music Man* (pit orchestra), *Guys and Dolls* (pit orchestra), *Bugsy Malone* as Dandy Dan, and *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown* as Peppermint Patty. Previous plays include *The Play that Goes Wrong* (Tech Crew) and *La Gringa* (ensemble).

Esmeralda Garcia Huicochea is a lovely and kind person. She likes to sing and dance, and she plays the clarinet and piano. She enjoys listening to all kinds of music, and while she is doing her assignments and chores, she listens to kids pop music.

Lorena Izquierdo has been a dancer for Ballet Folklorico Sones Mexicanos for a few years and has performed with them several times including last summer at Disney Springs. Lorena also sings with choristers at Ascension St. Edmund's parish. She has studied piano and this past school year, she learned how to play the clarinet. When she was six years old, Lorena declared that she was born to sing and dance!

Caleb Reed-Jennings is 15 years old and a sophomore at Fenwick High School. Caleb's love for singing has opened many doors for him at a young age, singing all over the city and surrounding states. Caleb is returning to Bellissima Opera after performing in the *Future Perfect* production two years ago, where he also served as a youth intern.

Shiloh Jennings is 13 years old and is in 8th grade at Catalyst Circle Rock Charter School. Shiloh enjoys being in the spotlight, whether it's for cheer, dance, gymnastics, tumbling, singing, or acting. Shiloh was heavily involved in Bellissima Opera's *Future Perfect* production at the Kehrein Center for the Arts two years ago and is thrilled to be returning to another Bellissima opera production.

Gwenna Kelley is always singing around the house, bringing delight to her family! She takes weekly voice lessons at the Oak Park School of Music and sings with her school's student cantors and church choir. Gwenna has played the cello since kindergarten and took ballet at the Academy and piano lessons at Musikgarten when she was younger. Her favorite style of music is musical theater and she has been a part of several productions through Actor's Garden, Ovation, and Trinity High School.

Andrew Labno is an incoming 6th grader at Ascension Catholic School. He enjoys playing video games, swimming, and going to waterparks. He also writes great poetry! He is excited to be in his first opera!

Sophia Labno is currently in choir and band. She has a great ear and can make very realistic sounding animal noises, so someday she would like to take classes to do voiceover work. She loves fun pop music and classical music.

Gabriela (Gigi) Lufrano loves to sing! She is in the children's choir at Ascension and is also very interested in acting. She is a gymnast and enjoys performing routines to different types of music. She especially loves Taylor Swift! :)

Lucas Madrigal is learning violin and has started teaching himself piano. He likes a large range of music and listening to new genres.

Marty O'Connor loves to dance and play the piano. His favorite kinds of music are pop and musicals. Marty and his brother have dance parties every week in their kitchen. He loves to act and has always wanted to be in plays.

Erin Tybor currently plays violin and loves singing along to anything Disney!

Clara Wilkens loves to dance, both ballet and contemporary. She also plays piano and likes to listen to up-tempo pop songs. Taylor Swift is her favorite artist.

Speed Dating Tonight!

Words and Music by Michael Ching
Based on a concept by Dean Anthony

CONDUCTOR Brian Burkhardt

PIANIST Peter Stigdon

CAST *in order of solo appearance*

Gwenna Kelley	Busgirl
Dorian McCall	Bartender
Jules Furgal	Waitress
Olga Saad Karam	Dating Coordinator, Cat Lady Dater
Nicole Cooper-Hoke	Cell Phone Dater
Russell Hoke	Cell Phone Dater
Maia Surace	Talkative Woman, Ex Duet Dater
Garrett Johannsen	Fragile Man Dater
Elizabeth Fisher	Fragile Woman Dater, Trio
Bill McMurray	Car Man, Ex Duet Dater
Ryan De Ryke	OMG Happy Birthday Dater
Christine Steyer	Dancer, UFO Watcher Dater, Trio
Carl Ratner	Bar Regular
Emily Mwila	Adjust to the Times Dater, Trio
Peter Stigdon	Crush Apples Dater

Preshow Music: It's the 1930s

"We Just Couldn't Say Goodbye" by Harry Woods
(Victor Young & His Orchestra, 1932)

"O Du Lieber Augustin" unknown, ca 1800

"I'd Be Telling A Lie" (Ted Fiorito & His Orchestra 1933)

"The Leibstandarte Parade" 1934

"What Will I Tell My Heart" Jack Lawrence and Peter Tinturin
(Gene Kardos & His Orchestra 1937)

The Little Rascals "Good Old Days" Leroy Shield, 1930

"Whistle While You Work" Frank Churchill & Larry Morey
(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937)

"Give A Broken Heart A Break" Isham Jones
(Freddy Martin & His Orchestra 1935)

"Kaiser-Walzer" Johann Strauss, 1889

"Would You" Nacio Herb Brown & Arthur Freed
(Richard Himber & His Ritz Carlton Orchestra 1936)

"Popeye the Sailor Man" Samuel Lerner, 1933

"You're My Past, Present and Future"
Mack Gordon & Harry Revel (Ruth Etting 1933)

"That Never-To-Be-Forgotten Night"
(Joe Haymes & His Orchestra 1936)

Clem McCarthy's original
Louis v Schmeling 1936 fight commentary

SUNG BY OUR YOUTH CAST

"Swinging on a Star" Jimmy Van Heusen & Johnny Burke, 1944

"Over the Rainbow" Harold Arlen & Yip Harburg, 1939

"Pennies From Heaven" Arthur Johnston & Johnny Burke, 1936

About Bellissima Opera

*Creating on stage what we want to see
in our community and in our world.*

Oak Park-based Bellissima Opera was formed in 2006 to preserve and promote the tradition of the classically trained vocal artist and to expand public appreciation of both opera and classical music. In addition to presenting innovative concert events with professional musicians and commissioning new works for voice, we created an outreach program from kindergarten through high school. Since 2008, Opera In the Classroom has brought music to more than 24,000 students in the region.

In 2019, Bellissima Opera founder and director Christine Steyer joined with Claudia Hommel's many cabaret projects to form the performing arts facilitator Working In Concert. Together WIC educates, advocates for, and mobilizes a global network of singers who use the art of song to empower lives and build community.

Our goal is to reflect the great diversity of Chicago's population in the artists we work with, the audiences we entertain, and the themes we embrace.

As a key pillar of WIC's vocal arts initiatives, Bellissima Opera produces concerts on unique themes, often showcasing newer American songs. Each year we celebrate International Women's Day to feature women composers, writers and performers. Bellissima also creates and presents new operas from the award-winning Tales of Transcendence series.

Stay in Touch with Bellissima Opera

bellissimaopera.com



Lobby Display

Take a minute to visit our lobby display.
There you will learn of the 1930s
events that inspired *Outside the Ring*.

Display by Christine Steyer

Connect with Us for More!
WORKINGINCONCERT.ORG




Carolyn Broquet Elisabeth Howard Ren Perez
Patrick Davis Rosalind Hurwitz Carl Ratner
Susan Dennis Staci Kelley Barbara Smith
Carla Gordon Lauren Lassen Christine Steyer
Aaron Grace Cristina Marinescu Patricia Tyson
Claudia Hommel Dorian McCall Suzanne Walsh

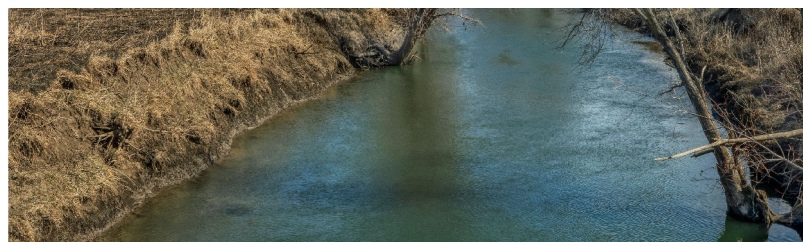
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