

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MEDIA CONTACTS:

For Opera Parallèle:
Scott Horton Communications
510-735-9200

For SFJAZZ:
Marshall Lamm
mlamm@sfjazz.org
510-928-1410

**OPERA PARALLÈLE AND SFJAZZ CO-PRESENT FULLY STAGED PRODUCTION OF
CHAMPION, AN OPERA IN JAZZ
BY TERENCE BLANCHARD**

**BASED ON THE LIFE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN, BOXING CHAMPION EMILE
GRIFFITH (1938-2013)**

FEBRUARY 19-28, 2016 AT SFJAZZ CENTER IN SAN FRANCISCO

(

San Francisco, CA, April 9, 2015) – San Francisco’s Opera Parallèle and SFJAZZ have announced their first collaboration: a new, fully staged production of *Champion, An Opera in Jazz by Terence Blanchard*, SFJAZZ Resident Artistic Director, with 8 performances to be given February 19-28, 2016 at SFJAZZ Center. Based on the life of African-American, boxing champion Emile Griffith (1938-2013), the production marks both Opera Parallèle’s first foray into an operatic jazz idiom and SFJAZZ’s first opera. The complete schedule of performances and ticket prices will be announced on June 12, 2015. Tickets will go on sale to SFJAZZ members on July 1, 2015 and to the public on July 15, 2015. For more information, visit www.operaparallele.org and www.sfjazz.org.

“Opera Parallèle is so honored to work with Terence Blanchard and SFJAZZ, two incredible leaders in the field,” says Opera Parallèle founder and Artistic Director Nicole Paiement. “The story of Emile Griffith is extremely powerful and personal and at the same time his dreams, determination and triumphs will resonate with just about everyone who has passion and drive. It is perfectly suited to Opera Parallèle’s style of operatic story-telling.”

“SFJAZZ is extremely excited for this unprecedented production with Terence Blanchard and Opera Parallèle,” says SFJAZZ Founder and Executive Artistic Director Randall Kline. “Our Resident Artistic Director program challenges artists to look forward, break rules, and present music that pushes the envelope. Terence has embraced this concept and is pushing it further than we could have imagined. The SFJAZZ Center was designed and built with productions like *Champion* in mind.”

ABOUT CHAMPION, AN OPERA IN JAZZ

A groundbreaking work combining the disciplines of opera and jazz, Terence Blanchard’s *Champion, An Opera in Jazz* (2013) tells the real-life story of world champion boxer Emile Griffith, a man haunted by memories of his past who struggled to reconcile his sexuality in a hyper-macho world. Co-produced by Opera Parallèle and SFJAZZ, *Champion* is visually stunning

production will feature full staging and video elements with soloists, a jazz trio, orchestra and Gospel chorus, bringing out the full glory of Blanchard's soulful score as it illuminates Griffith's triumphs and struggles, which are still broadly and powerfully relevant today.

Tormented by the death of opponent Benny Paret following their 1962 bout for the welterweight title, Griffith spent his life questioning himself and a society that would accept his accidental killing of a fellow athlete, but not his sexuality. The opera features a libretto by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Michael Cristofer and premiered to widespread critical acclaim at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in June 2013, starring Denyce Graves, Aubrey Allicock, Arthur Woodley, Robert Orth and Meredith Arwady. It was one of five finalists for the International Opera Award in 2014. Terence Blanchard will re-orchestrate the score especially for the Opera Parallè/SFJAZZ production.

Team and Cast

The production team includes Nicole Paiement, Artistic Director and conductor; Brian Staufenbiel, Creative Director & Resident Stage Director; Brian Staufenbiel, set and lobby installation designer; Matthew Antaky, lighting designer; Christine Crook, costume designer; Frédéric Boulay, projection designer; David Murakami, media designer; and Jeanna Parham, wig and make-up designer.

The cast features baritone Arthur Woodley as Old Emile Griffith, mezzo-soprano Karen Slack as Emelda Griffith, Emile's mother; baritone Robert Orth as Howie Albert, Emile's trainer; and bass-baritone Ken Kellogg as the young Emile Griffith; and other cast to be announced. A gospel chorus performs as reporters, photographers, hat makers, men at the boxing gym, Caribbean paraders, and female impersonators.

About Terence Blanchard

For his second year as one of four SFJAZZ Resident Artistic Directors, Terence Blanchard firmly establishes himself one of the most forward-thinking musicians in jazz. The SFJAZZ Resident Artistic Director program allows artists to curate exclusive programming of new works, unprecedented collaborations, and boundary-breaking configurations at the SFJAZZ Center. Blanchard is jazz's foremost renaissance man. A savvy bandleader, celebrated film composer, brilliant jazz writer and influential educator, the five-time Grammy-winning New Orleans native is a creative force who sits at the apex of the contemporary jazz scene. Since first writing music for Spike Lee's 1990 jazz-set movie *Mo' Better Blues*, Blanchard has become a renowned film composer with over 50 scores to his credit including *Malcolm X*, *Clockers*, *Summer of Sam*, *25th Hour*, *Inside Man*, *Miracle at St. Anna*, and the Hurricane Katrina documentary *When the Levees Broke* for HBO. He also scored Kevin Costner's 2014 critically acclaimed film, *Black Or White*.

This May will see the release of his new CD, *Breathless*, in which Blanchard powerfully and playfully journeys into another jazz realm with his new quintet, The E-Collective—an exciting zone of grooved fusion teeming with funky, r&b and blues colors. It's a first foray into straight-up grooveland for Blanchard, and he's thrilled with the dance-steeped party he and his quintet (and guests) have cooked up. "Breathless is the album I've been wanting to do for quite awhile," he says. "Growing up I was listening to the Headhunters and Weather Report, which had a strong effect on me. I always listened to groove-based music—Jimi Hendrix, Parliament

Funkadelic and then later listening to Prince and D'Angelo and later what [jazz trumpeter] Russell Gunn was doing. But up to this point, I had never explored it."

In 2014, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and Jazz St. Louis combined forces to premiere Blanchard's first opera, *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* based on the story of the boxing champion Emile Griffith. This follows his recent score for Emily Mann's Broadway production of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

After the broad scope of such lofty undertakings, returning to a small group setting can be a challenge. "You get accustomed to having so many different colors at your disposal," he says. "So I try to figure out a way to have as much diversity in everything that we play, the same expansive color palette as when you have an orchestra and voices."

About Opera Parallèle

The award-winning Opera Parallèle develops and performs contemporary operas in a dynamic balance of known and new works, in new productions that shed light on their subject matter and engage audiences' senses and sensibilities. Opera Parallèle is the only organization in the Bay Area presenting fully cast and staged contemporary operas exclusively.

Opera Parallèle also commissions new orchestrations of contemporary grand operas, to give a sense of intimacy to its productions and to give a new life to works that might not otherwise be performed.

Artistic director Nicole Paiement founded Opera Parallèle (originally Ensemble Parallèle) to perform new music and to collaborate "in parallel" with various artists including dancers, choreographers, visual and multimedia artists. These collaborations have enriched the Company's productions and appeal to a wide-ranging audience, from seasoned opera-goers and classical music enthusiasts to contemporary art and dance-goers.

In 2007 Opera Parallèle began to focus exclusively on contemporary opera, and in February of that year the organization presented the world premiere of Lou Harrison's opera *Young Caesar*. Most recently its productions have included the California premiere of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* in a chamber orchestration by composer John Rea (2010); the Bay Area premiere of Philip Glass' opera *Orphée* (2011); and Virgil Thompson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* in collaboration with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with the international exhibition *The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde*. In February 2012, Opera Parallèle performed the world premiere of its commissioned reorchestration of John Harbison's opera *The Great Gatsby*. 2013/2014 was a year filled with new works, from Osvaldo Golijov's riveting opera *Ainadamar*, Opera Parallèle's Graphic Opera Project, *Gesualdo – Prince of Madness*, Leonard Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*, Adam Gorb's *Anyá17*, and a double bill of the Weill/Brecht Mahagonny Songspiel with the Poulenc/Apollinaire *Les mamelles de Tirésias*. The company comes to this *Heart of Darkness* project fresh from a hugely successful production of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, which was presented in February 2015 in San Francisco and in March 2015 at Santa Monica's Broad Stage.

Since it was founded, Opera Parallèle has presented 157 performances including 31 world premieres, released 14 recordings, and commissioned 20 new works; and has performed in North America, Australia, and Asia

About SFJAZZ

Founded in 1983 under the name Jazz in the City, SFJAZZ is the world's leading cultural institution devoted to jazz. Across the SFJAZZ Annual Season (September–May), the San Francisco Jazz Festival (June) and Summer Sessions (July–August), the organization presents over 300 performances each year at the new SFJAZZ Center and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. SFJAZZ serves over 200,000 fans and students every year and has several award-winning resident jazz ensembles, the SFJAZZ Collective and the SFJAZZ High School All-Stars.

After 30 years of using rented halls, SFJAZZ now has a home in the vibrant performing arts district of San Francisco. The SFJAZZ Center opened in January of 2013 and is the only stand-alone facility built specifically for jazz in the United States. The LEED-Gold certified Center offers the superb acoustics of a great concert hall and the relaxed intimacy of a jazz club.

###