

# PITTSBURGH OPERA

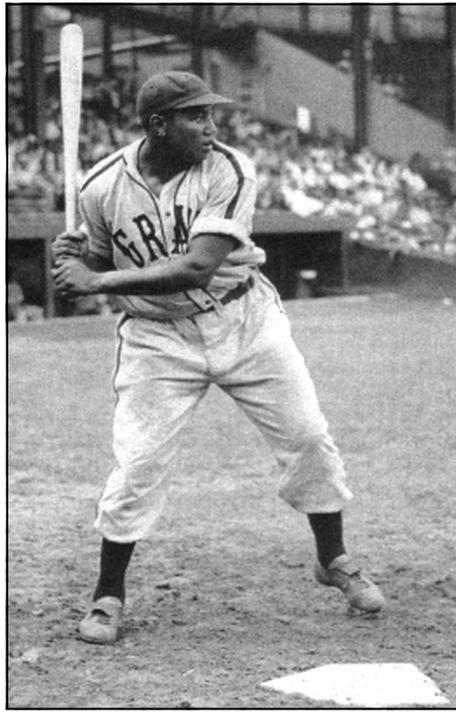
E D U C A T I O N

## Study Guide to the Opera

# The Summer King – The Josh Gibson Story

Music by Daniel Sonenberg • Libretto by Daniel Sonenberg and Daniel Nester, with additional lyrics by Mark Campbell

**Josh Gibson's stats:** Batted: Right Threw: Right Career batting average: .359  
 Career Highlights: 12X All-Star, 2X Negro World Series  
 Teams: Homestead Grays, Pittsburgh Crawfords, Dragones de Ciudad Trujillo, Azules de Veracruz  
 PHOTOS courtesy of the Josh Gibson Foundation



## Unsung hero until now . . .

### Josh Gibson, “a Pittsburgh Guy”

by Jill Leahy

For the first time in our 78-year history, Pittsburgh Opera is producing a world premiere. The work tells the story of a Pittsburgh sports legend who will now be better known throughout the world—not just in the sports world.

Composer Daniel Sonenberg has always loved baseball and the stories associated with the early years of the sport, particularly the stories about the Negro Leagues of the 1930s and early 1940s. As he learned more about the life and death of the legendary player named Josh Gibson, Sonenberg knew he had the elements to make an opera.

Joshua “Josh” Gibson (December 21, 1911 – January 20, 1947) was born in Georgia and moved to Pittsburgh in the 1920s. By age 18, he was playing professional baseball for both the Crawfords and the Homestead Grays in the Negro Leagues. Much has been written about the life of Josh Gibson—an entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, stories on *ESPN*, articles by the Society for American Baseball Research—but Daniel Sonenberg’s opera, *The Summer King – The Josh Gibson Story*, delves deeply into the tragedy of a great athlete who was born at a pivotal time in American history. Because of his exceptional play, he was a catalyst for change, making it possible for Jackie Robinson to break the color barrier. Josh excelled in spite of his circumstances; he dealt with the sorrow of losing his wife in childbirth, the pain of being away from his children much of the time, the death of his father, and the suffering from a brain tumor that ultimately ended his career. Josh Gibson remained a man committed to being the best ballplayer he could be in the league in which he played, and baseball historians consider him to be among the very best hitters and catchers ever. He died before Major League Baseball became integrated, but he was finally inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972.



# *The Summer King – The Josh Gibson Story*

## ACT I

### SCENE 1 Cut Off Man barbershop, Brooklyn, NY, 1957

Boys playing stickball hit a ball into a barbershop. When the radio plays “Did Ya See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball?” the Elder and Younger Barbers argue about the Negro League and the legacy of Josh Gibson. The Elder Barber remembers Gibson’s incredible accomplishments and describes the day that Gibson hit a ball completely out of Yankee Stadium.

### SCENE 2 Yankee Stadium, NY, 1930

The Elder Barber imagines a Radio Announcer describing the epic battle between pitcher Broadway Connie Rector and a young Josh Gibson.

### SCENE 3 A park in Homestead, PA, 1930

Spectators respond to Josh’s tremendous home run. Helen, his young wife, arrives with blackberry pie. They look forward to their future (**Beautiful Afternoon**) and Helen tells Josh that she’s pregnant. A musical interlude turns dark. Josh sadly reflects on Helen’s death giving birth to their twin children and his commitment to his remaining love—the game of baseball.

### SCENE 4 Crawford Grill, Pittsburgh, PA, 1935

Players and fans of the Pittsburgh Crawfords celebrate and praise Mr. Gus Greenlee, owner of both the Crawford Grill and the team. Josh arrives with Hattie, and Wendell Smith, from the *Pittsburgh Courier*, introduces himself to Josh. The daily number is called. Grace is the winner; she bet 440, which was Josh’s batting average the previous season. Smith suggests that with numbers like that, Josh might make history by playing for a white team and breaking the color barrier, an idea his teammates, led by Double Duty Radcliffe, disdain. Josh and his teammates scoff at Smith’s idea, but Josh is secretly intrigued by it. Grace persuades him to consider it.

### SCENE 5 Wendell Smith’s office, Pittsburgh Courier, March 1938

Wendell “Smitty” Smith asks Josh to consider working together to break the color barrier. Smith recalls his experience with segregation in college and admits that he was never “lightning” like Josh. Smith says Josh could change everything. Josh commits to think about it.

### SCENE 6 Josh’s apartment, Pittsburgh, PA, March 1938

Josh and Grace, now a couple, return from a night on the town. She scolds him, describes his greatness, and urges him to broaden his dreams.

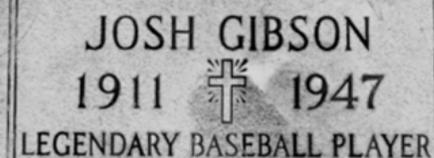
### SCENE 7 Owner’s office, Griffith Stadium, Washington, DC, April 1940

Clark Griffith and his nephew meet with Josh and dangle the notion of playing for the Senators. The meeting has clearly been set up to appease the black press. After complimenting Josh’s skills, they warn him about the consequences of playing in the majors. The exchange grows threatening (**Men such as we**). The Griffiths pompously describe their responsibility and their foremost concern with Josh’s best interests, making it clear they have no intention of signing him. Clark walks Josh to the door and tells him, “Boy, there’s a colored facility at the top of the stairs.”

### SCENE 8 Outside the Griffith Office, and Crawford Grill, April 1940

Josh, demoralized and frustrated, says all he ever wanted was his wife Helen and the game. He arrives at the Crawford Grill, where players are discussing a lucrative offer from Mexico that hinges on Josh’s participation. Smith wants Josh to stay and fight, but Josh eagerly accepts the deal (**Hello Mexico**). Grace agrees, “as long as it’s temporary.”

*Intermission*



JOSH GIBSON  
1911 ✝ 1947  
LEGENDARY BASEBALL PLAYER

## Characters

**Josh Gibson** *baritone*  
Negro League batter and catcher

**Grace** *mezzo-soprano*  
Josh’s lover

**Sam Bankhead** *bass*  
Josh’s best friend and teammate

**Wendell Smith** *tenor*  
Young black sportswriter for the African-American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*

**Helen Gibson** *coloratura soprano*  
Josh’s young wife

**Elder Barber** *tenor*  
Former ballplayer

**Younger Barber** *baritone*

**Radio Announcer** *tenor*

**Branch Rickey** *tenor*  
Owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers

**Broadway Connie Rector** *mute*  
A player (dancer)

**Gus Greenlee** *tenor*  
Numbers runner and owner of the Pittsburgh Crawfords

**Scribe** *high lyric tenor*  
Gus’s assistant

**Clark Griffith** *tenor*  
Owner of the Washington Senators

**Calvin Griffith** *baritone*  
Clark’s nephew and protégé

**Señor Alcalde** *high lyric tenor*  
Mayor of Vera Cruz, Mexico

**Trash-Talking Player** *tenor*

**Hattie** *soprano*  
A fan and girlfriend to players

### Josh’s teammates:

**Judy Johnson** *tenor*

**Cool Papa Bell** *baritone*

**Double Duty Radcliffe** *tenor*

**Dave Hoskins** *baritone*

Mariachi Singers, Spectators, Players,  
Girlfriends, Street Kids

## ACT II

### SCENE 1 Escambron Stadium, Vera Cruz, Mexico, October 1941

During a celebration featuring Mexican music, Josh is heralded as player of the year by Señor Alcalde. Sam tells Josh about an offer from back home matching the Mexican pay they receive. Grace is excited to return home, but Josh celebrates the good life the players enjoy in Mexico. As the revelers leave, Grace tells Josh that she's not staying in Mexico. Hattie, now with Double Duty Radcliffe, shares a joint with Josh as he and his friends celebrate "high living." Josh complains that his head isn't feeling so well, and as the celebration begins to spin out of control, Josh proclaims his need to go home, and then loses his balance and collapses.

### SCENE 2 Wendell Smith's office, *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 1945

Branch Rickey tells Smith that he is proudly ready to hire a black player for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey needs someone "with the spirit to fight back, but . . . the guts not to." Smith tells Rickey, "I may have a name for you."

### SCENE 3 An empty ballfield, Homestead, PA, October 1945

Josh, looking haggard and bloated, stands alone on a field hitting balls, lamenting that nothing's changed for him in the four years since Mexico, and then expresses agony at something pressed against his head. Players, including Sam Bankhead, engage in a pickup game. Trash Talking Player takes a turn at bat with Josh catching behind him. The two trade insults, with Josh eventually getting the better of the situation. Sam urges the younger players to respect Josh, and describes his famous Yankee Stadium home run. Wendell Smith then arrives, excitedly telling the news that Jackie Robinson has been hired by the Dodgers. Josh is crestfallen (**I got my own league**).

### SCENE 4 Crawford Grill (now closed), October 1945

Josh has busted into the old Crawford Grill, bringing his own beer cans. Grace chides Josh for being too caught up in his "own league," asking him, "You think you can drink your way into the big leagues?" Josh talks of imaginary conversations with Joe DiMaggio. Grace tells him that her husband is returning from war, and that she is leaving. She describes the dreams she had of transcending her dreary existence in a loveless marriage with few material comforts; she realizes that she has to face her real life and abandon her fantasies for Josh—fantasies he never shared.

### SCENE 5 Bedroom, Josh's mother's house, Pittsburgh, PA, 1947

Josh speaks intently to an imaginary Joe DiMaggio, asking "You ain't gonna answer me?" Josh says that he will die that night. Sam pays his respects to his dying friend and tells him that Jackie Robinson is going to join the Dodgers. They listen to the news on the radio as Josh withdraws into his own delirium. Helen's ghost visits and the two remember their hopes for a bright future (**Beautiful Afternoon**). Helen disappears. Josh realizes where he is and speaks to Sam about his fabled Yankee Stadium home run: "It went out a long way . . . I hope you'll remember that." Josh dies. Sam remembers the fallen Summer King, who led all Negro Leaguers to the Promised Land, but was denied entry himself. He then contemplates his own plight, and that of his contemporaries—players who were either too old, or not great enough, to enjoy the fruits of integration. The Elder Barber extolls Josh Gibson's greatness as Sam wonders about fate, asking "Did we need to be greater men than our king to avoid our king's fate?"

### SCENE 6 Cut Off Man barbershop, Brooklyn, NY, 1957

The Elder and Younger Barbers continue their argument until the Younger Barber puts on "the damn game."

### EPILOGUE Outside Yankee Stadium, NY, 1930

Children play stickball outside Yankee Stadium. The Radio Announcer calls the legendary home run. The bat cracks and the Streets Kids freeze, looking straight up to the sky, asking "Where'd it go? Is it fair?" The kids scatter and one boy emerges with the baseball (**Did ya see?**).

— Synopsis adapted from Daniel Sonenberg

## Meet the Librettists

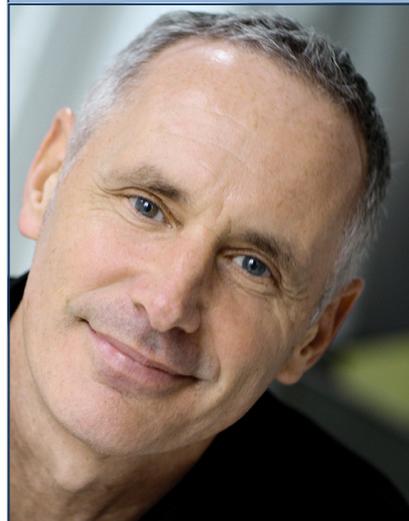
by Jill Leahy



### Daniel Nester

has written nonfiction, poems, and librettos. He is an associate professor of English at The College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY.

To learn more about Daniel Nester and his writing, visit [danielnester.com](http://danielnester.com)



### Mark Campbell

has written more than 15 operas. His most-known work is *Silent Night*, which received the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2012. Other operas include: *The Shining*, *Later the Same Evening*, *Volpone*, and *The Manchurian Candidate*. One of the most in-demand librettists in contemporary opera, Campbell served as a dramaturge and provided additional lyrics for *The Summer King – The Josh Gibson Story*.

For a complete biography, list of awards and upcoming works, visit [markcampbellwords.com](http://markcampbellwords.com)

# Meet the Composer

by Jill Leahy



**Composer/Co-librettist: Daniel Sonenberg** (1970 –)

**Daniel Sonenberg** is a composer, performer, and educator living in Portland, Maine. His opera, ***The Summer King – The Josh Gibson Story***, was developed by **American Opera Projects** and Commissioned by Portland Ovations. The opera premiered in concert form on May 8, 2014, by Portland Ovations, with support from the University of Southern Maine, at Merrill Auditorium in Portland, Maine. *The Summer King* has been substantially revised for its staged world premiere at Pittsburgh Opera.

Sonenberg is currently Associate Professor and Resident Composer at the **University of Southern Maine**. Recent compositions include *Machine Shop* (2015), for marimba and recorded electric guitars; *Black's the Life* (2014), for piano trio; *Delve* (2013), premiered by the Da Capo Chamber Players; and *Takes One to Know One* (2012), for percussion, bass clarinet, cello, and double bass. He has also released three CDs of original rock music since 2013.

**To learn more about Daniel Sonenberg, visit:**

[www.danielsonenberg.org](http://www.danielsonenberg.org)

Read the composer's website, which includes a list of his compositions, audio and video clips, and his blog, *Sonen-blog*.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwiknkArr88](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwiknkArr88)

Listen to an interview with the composer and audio from the New Works Forum 2014.

[pittsburghopera.org/summerking](http://pittsburghopera.org/summerking)

Listen to an interview with Dan Sonenberg by Tim Benz on DK Sports Radio, September 7, 2016.

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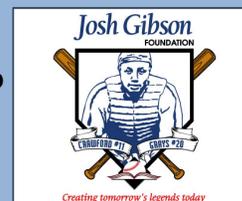
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