

# Blue

Music by Jeanine Tesori • Libretto by Tazewell Thompson

Kenneth Kellogg, front, in *Blue*. The officers that Tazewell Thompson consulted referred to their uniforms as their “blues.”

All *Blue* production photos by Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival



## Do only contemporary operas tackle the big issues?

*Blue*, a 2019 opera, explores current issues about race, violence, and reconciliation. Librettist Tazewell Thompson intended to tell the story of a black family struck by tragedy—the father a police officer who is torn apart when the son is killed at a protest by another officer. In *The New York Times*, Anthony Tommasini praised the libretto—*Blue* featured “one of the most elegant librettos I’ve heard in a long time.” In recent years, the nation has been roiled by unrest over police brutality and race relations, and ***Blue* places timely issues at the forefront of modern opera.**

Other operas written in recent decades have grappled with **violent and unsettling issues**. Works by John Adams, such as *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, took characters and stories from the headlines and placed them on stage. At *La Scala* in 2015, Giorgio Battistelli’s *CO2* was based on *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore’s documentary about **global warming**—a current issue of great consequence.

Have opera stories only recently tackled big issues? Political scientist John Bokina, in *Opera and Politics*, argues that opera has been a political art form since the 17th century. When stage director Peter Sellars updated *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Fidelio*, he wanted to create the same immediacy that Mozart and Beethoven prompted in support of the French Revolution. In the 1900s, Kurt Weill tackled **race relations** and the **social oppression of immigrants**. Other beloved operas have addressed issues that concern us all: *Don Giovanni*, *Tosca*, *La traviata*, and *Madama Butterfly* challenge us to reflect how **women** are treated in society. *Carmen* holds up a mirror to a depiction of **marginalized people**. Throughout the centuries, opera has reflected class conflict, revolutions, and other difficult subject matter.

Opera has the emotional power to expose audiences to serious issues while allowing them to grapple with big issues on their own terms. All of the issues addressed in *Blue*—family issues, race, violence, reconciliation—have existed throughout the history of humanity and the history of opera.



## *Blue* Synopsis

The Mother calls her Girlfriends together to her apartment in Harlem to tell them she is expecting a child. Their joy turns to concern when she tells them she is carrying a boy; they warn her that her son will not be welcomed in this country. When her hope and love—for the child she carries and for The Father, a policeman—will not be shaken, her Girlfriends relent, blessing her and the child. The Father’s police officer buddies, on the other hand, are immediately joyful—and a bit jealous—when they learn their fellow officer has fathered a son.

Sixteen years later, The Son, a student artist and activist, frequently finds himself at odds with the law for his involvement with non-violent political protests. The Father confronts The Son, who pushes back, accusing his police officer Father of upholding an oppressive system. Despite The Son’s bitter words, The Father tells him he will always love him and hold him close.

After The Son is shot by a police officer at a protest, the heartbroken Father meets with The Reverend, who attempts to comfort him and encourages him to forgive. The Father, adopting the attitude of The Son, lashes out angrily. As the funeral for The Son approaches, The Girlfriends return to Harlem to support the grief-stricken Mother as she prepares to lay her son to rest.

At the funeral, Father and Mother pray with the congregation, asking God to welcome their son to Heaven. The Father briefly becomes lost in a fog of emotion, guilt, regret, and memory, then finds his way back to the community gathered around him in church.

In an epilogue, we see The Father, The Mother and The Son, together, in a bittersweet moment around a kitchen table, sharing a meal, as The Son reconciles with his father and announces his plans for further artistic studies and one more peaceful protest.

Credit: *The Glimmerglass Festival* world premiere

### Time:

21st Century

### Place:

Harlem, New York City, New York

### Premiere:

*Blue* was commissioned by the Glimmerglass Festival and premiered July 14, 2019. The opera received the Music Critics Association of North America 2020 Award for Best New Opera.

## Characters

### The Father

*bass-baritone*

A policeman who is at odds with his teenage son about his political activity.

### The Mother

*mezzo-soprano*

The policeman’s wife, and owner of a Harlem café, who is overjoyed when she learns that she is carrying a boy.

### The Son

*tenor*

A student artist and activist at non-violent political protests.

### The Reverend

*high baritone*

Attempts to comfort the heartbroken Father and encourages forgiveness.

### The Mother’s close friends and The Father’s policemen buddies

Girlfriend 1, Nurse, Congregant  
*coloratura soprano*

Girlfriend 2, Congregant 2  
*mezzo-soprano*

Girlfriend 3, Congregant 3  
*alto*

Policeman 1, Congregant 1  
*tenor*

Policeman 2, Congregant 2  
*tenor*

Policeman 3, Congregant 3  
*baritone*



## Composer

**Jeanine Tesori** (1961– ) is an American composer and musical arranger. She is the most prolific and honored female theatrical composer in history,

with five Broadway musicals and five Tony Award nominations. She won the 1999 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music in a Play for Nicholas Hytner's production of *Twelfth Night*, the 2004 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music for *Caroline, or Change*, and the 2015 Tony Award for Best Original Score for *Fun Home* (shared with Lisa Kron), making them the first female writing team to win that award. Tesori was twice named a finalist for Pulitzer Prize for Drama (*Fun Home*, *Soft Power*).

Tesori was born Jeanine Tesoriero in Port Washington, New York, on Long Island. Her father was a physician, but her grandfather was a conductor and composer, and when she began taking piano lessons at four, her family noticed that she could already play by ear. Tesori abandoned her classical training in favor of sports during her teens but often traveled into New York to hear musicals, and as a pre-med student at Barnard College, she switched her major to music. Making a living as a Broadway pit musician in, among other shows, *Chess*, Tesori married Keith Levenson and used the name Jeanine Levenson for a time. The pair wrote a musical called *Galileo*, about the Italian scientist.

Tesori is a member of the Dramatists Guild and was cited by ASCAP as the first female composer to have two musicals running concurrently on Broadway. She was the founding artistic director of *Encores! Off-Center* at New York City Center and is currently a lecturer in music at Yale University. Most of all, she is the proud parent of Siena Rafter.

*I'd been trained as a classical musician, but also as a pop musician. My teacher made sure that everything was available.*



## Librettist

**Tazewell Thompson** (1948– ) is an internationally acclaimed director for opera and theatre, an award-winning playwright, librettist, teacher, and actor.

His opera *Blue*, with Jeanine Tesori, won the 2020 MCANNA Award for Best New Opera in North America. *The New York Times* listed *Blue* as Best in Classical Music for 2019.

Thompson has more than 150 directing credits, including 30 world and American premieres, in major opera houses and theaters across the USA, France, Spain, Italy, Africa, Japan, and Canada. Thompson was chosen to rewrite the libretto and direct the premiere staging of Aaron Copland's *The Second Hurricane* as part of a New York state-wide celebration of Copland's 85th birthday.

*Unfortunately, the themes in Blue have no expiration date. I add my voice to those of the characters singing in the opera, and to those of the real families suffering great losses. Our eyes will never be free of tears.*

A select list of operas directed: *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, *Death in Venice*, *Xerxes*, *Carmen*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Tender Land*, *Street Scene*, *Pearl Fishers*, *Norma*, *Margaret Garner*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Patience*, *Freedom Ride*. He is commissioned by Seattle Opera to write a song cycle and his opera *Blue* was scheduled for productions at Washington National Opera, Chicago Lyric, Minnesota Opera, and Mostly Mozart Festival. At schools and conservatories, he has directed productions and held master classes at NYU, Juilliard, Yale, Dartmouth, Columbia, Tulane, Indiana/ Bloomington, and Kansas/ Lawrence. Chair of Theater Department: St. Ann's School and Columbia Prep.

Thompson was named Director of Opera Studies at Manhattan School of Music and also teaches voice there. He is a member of SDC, SAG, AFTRA, AEA, AGMA, and CAE.



## Tazewell Thompson's Journey to Writing an Opera about Police Violence



Excerpted from:  
"My Journey to Writing an  
Opera About Police Violence", *The New York Times* (nytimes.com)

In 2015, I received an email from Francesca Zambello, the director of the Glimmerglass Festival. "I'm interested in commissioning an opera about race in America, about where we are now as a people dealing with race," she wrote. "I have a composer set, and I'm looking for a librettist. What are your thoughts on the following writers?" They were all names known to me, some quite famous.

"What about me?" I replied.

I have been writing something down each night since I could hold a crayon. My parents' criminal behavior kept them in and out of prison throughout my childhood. They were deemed irresponsible, unsafe and unsuitable—not fit to raise me. So I was taken from them and made a ward of the state. I spent seven years at a convent, where I was introduced to storytelling by a Sister who read to us boys at bedtime, everything from "The Hardy Boys" to Dickens.

Another Sister encouraged me to write for the school paper. At 9, I was editor, getting high on my power and the aroma of mimeograph fluid. But **poetry was my real calling**. I devoured Frost, Dickinson, and Shakespeare. I walked around reciting aloud. I was in love with the sound of my own voice, and the discovery that **words were not democratic**: Some were special and needed to be framed, stressed, or served up more or less than others.

"What about me?" I asked Francesca. She told me to send her something that would indicate that I understood the libretto form. So I sent Francesca two scenes set in Harlem, where I was born and now live. I did not want to write about a police officer. But despite myself, I soon recognized the irony, the tension, the glittering possibilities of personal conflict and heartache for a father whose son is murdered by a fellow officer.

Police officers refer to their uniform as "blues": "**When I'm in my blues.**" I kept cycling through titles, but it seemed better to be more ambiguous, to refer equally to a mood, a uniform, a kind of day, a kind of music.

When the final curtain fell on opening night, there was a long silence, followed by gasps, audible weeping, and then, finally, applause. *Blue* has been referred to as a "protest opera" and "the opera about police violence." I suppose both are true. But I did not set out with that goal. I wrote it from an obsessive need and sense of responsibility to tell an intimate story behind the numbing numbers of boys and men who are killed.

**But here we are now: art imitating life, life imitating art.**

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**Tazewell Thompson's libretto** was inspired by contemporary events and Black Literature, including Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Exploring race, violence, and reconciliation, *Blue* places timely issues at the forefront of modern opera and invites audiences to the emotional epicenter of their impact.

### For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

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