

Marble City Opera
Presents...

“I Can’t Breathe”

By:
Leslie Savoy Burrs & Brandon J. Gibson



*****World Premiere*****

February 24-26, 2022

Beck Cultural Exchange Center

Commissioned in consortium with Pacific Opera Project, Opera Columbus, and Cleveland Opera Theater.

Cast

Jayne Alilaw	<i>the Mother</i>
Breyon Ewing	<i>the Athlete</i>
Jacob Lay	<i>the Thug</i>
Benjamin Burney	<i>the Scholar</i>
Maurice Hendricks	<i>the Father</i>
Laura Thomason	<i>the Lover</i>

Chorus

Michelle Clayton

Robyn Maker

Teyah Young

**and introducing Avery Clayton, as “the Child”*

Orchestra

Soyeon Rachel Seo	Violin 1
Ethan Hess	Violin 2
Robyn James	Viola
Ian McClure	Cello
Margaret Moore	Flute
Lydia Schoen	Oboe
Alberto Martinez	Clarinet 1
Deirdre Ford	Clarinet 2
Ardyce Lee	Bassoon

Artistic Team

Jonathan Clark	Stage Director
Sierra Hammond	Asst. Stage Director/Mother (c)
Brandon Coffey	Music Director
Garrett McQueen	Conductor

Staff

Kathryn Frady	Executive Artistic Director
Brandon J. Gibson	Managing Director
Kayla Beard	Administrative Director

Synopsis

"I Can't Breathe" is an opera that explores themes of grief, loss, love, identity, and hope. It was inspired by and written in the wake of repeated instances of fatal police brutality. The stories told are NOT dramatizations of any real-life incident. Instead, we meet six fictional characters from different walks of life, each named for a different archetype. Lives that in one way or another are forever changed when innocent interactions with law enforcement go wrong. The opera highlights how things like good manners, a clean-cut appearance, and compliance with orders too often can't protect people of color from being treated as inherently dangerous. Six vignettes portray different facets of the African American experience and ultimately seek to answer the question, "How many more"?

Bios



Leslie Savoy Burrs' work as an award-winning composer, flutist and educator spans the spectrum of jazz to opera, chamber music to orchestra, solo voice to chorus, collaborating with internationally prominent artists and professionals in the diverse fields of literature, music, visual arts, medicine and psychology. In 2021 the African American opera *Vanqui* composed by Leslie Savoy Burrs, libretto by John A. Williams is the focus of the grant award for Humanism in Medicine received by Ohio State University College of Medicine

from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). The project is titled: *Traveling on Time, the Next Horizon for Health: Journeys to Equity, Inclusiveness, and Transformation of Racism to Humanism.*

In 2019 Burrs was commissioned by Gwynedd Mercy University to compose the inter-generational opera for children titled: *A Hobbit House Adventure* Burrs was commissioned by Philadelphia's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services (DBHIDS), Dr. Arthur C. Evans, Commissioner to create the film, *Autumn Journey* based on Burrs' music and poetry. The project is designed to establish a new model for mental health and substance abuse service delivery, education, awareness, and stigma reduction. Performances of his concert productions have been presented at the Sorbonne in Paris, the Schomburg Center in New York City, Annenberg's Zellerbach Theater, Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia, Opera America Conferences, New York and PBS radio, universities and colleges throughout the United States. Orchestra performances across the U.S. have featured Mr. Burrs' compositions and him as a jazz soloist. Mr. Burrs is the recipient of the National Opera Association's Legacy Award for composing the opera *Vanqui* originally commissioned by Opera Columbus.



Brandon J. Gibson is currently serving in his fifth year as Managing Director for Marble City Opera. In addition to his work as an arts administrator, he is also an active multi-disciplinary performer throughout East Tennessee.

Gibson is described by Arts Knoxville as a "beautifully resonant bass-baritone" and "a singer possessing an instrument of substantial richness and substance." As a soloist, he has sung with symphonies and concert bands and alongside musicians from genres ranging from jazz and hip-hop to funk, blues, and symphonic metal. He has sung roles in operas and musicals alike and is frequently in demand as a guest soloist for special events and church services.

A product of the University of Tennessee Theatre department, Gibson, has been reviewed as a "skilled actor" possessing "natural stage presence." He has performed in Shakespeare plays, modern dramas, comedies, and the occasional commercial. He's also a professional narrator and has lent his voice to several documentaries, including 2017's "Unity Ride" and various projects for the East Tennessee PBS series "Black in Appalachia."

When he's not singing, acting, or recording voice-overs, Gibson works as a freelance writer, reviewer, and essayist for the Knoxville publication "Blank Newspaper." Additionally, he freelances as an occasional master of ceremonies for concerts, festivals, weddings, and fundraisers. In his free time, he serves on the boards of various community cultural organizations.

Organizations include Knoxville Opera, Clarence Brown Theater, Marble City Opera, Carpetbag Theatre Inc., the Wordplayers, Tennessee Stage Company, Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, Circle Modern Dance, East Tennessee PBS, Black in Appalachia, East Tennessee Historical Society, East Tennessee Concert Band, Oak Ridge Community Band, Chattanooga Symphony & Opera, and Tiger Lily Theatre among others.

Recently he was selected as a member of the Greater Knoxville Business Journal's 2021 "40 Under 40" class.



A proud native of Memphis, TN, **Garrett McQueen** has performed as a member of the South Arkansas Symphony, Jackson Symphony, American Youth Symphony, Memphis Repertory Orchestra, the Eroica Ensemble, and most recently, the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra. He has also collaborated with ensembles including the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra, Memphis Symphony Orchestra, the Southeast Symphony, the Artosphere and Gateways Festival Orchestras, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Louisville Orchestra, and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Garrett has enjoyed giving solo recitals, performing with the Godiva Woodwind Quintet, USC Scholarship Quintet, and Cooper-Young

Winds, presenting master classes, acting as a guest instructor for the Bahamas Music Conservatory and Idyllwild Arts Academy, adjudicating West Tennessee Band auditions, and teaching a studio of flutists/oboists/bassoonists consisting of middle school, high school, and undergraduate college students.

Garrett has performed in multiple Broadway Musicals in Memphis under the baton of David Spencer and keeps himself busy in other free-lance activities, including being featured in Indie Rock tracks produced by Goner Records (2009) and True Panther Sounds (2010). Garrett has been heard as both a performer and guest host on APM's "Performance Today", and was featured as the principal bassoonist on the Memphis Repertory Orchestra's inaugural CD of works by Dvorak and Tchaikovsky. He has also appeared on a wide array of television shows, including Oxygen's "Snapped: Killer Couples", TV One's "Fatal Attraction", and Fox's "Glee".

In addition to remaining active in performance spaces, Garrett is the host and producer behind a number of nationally-syndicated radio programs, including "The Sound of 13", as heard in over 30 cities. He has also appeared as a guest host in a number of markets, including St. Louis, Knoxville, and Minneapolis. Away from the airwaves, Garrett specializes in music and racial equity presentations, with previous collaborators including the Gateways Music Festival, the Sphinx Organization, the Kennedy Center's Shift Festival, and countless schools, colleges, and universities. Garrett has also offered keynotes for events hosted by the Black Music Experience, the Minnesota Music Teachers Association, New Music Gathering, and the MacPhail Center for Music. In the press, Current named McQueen "a black talent in public media that you may not know, but should", and the New York Times noted his weekly podcast, TRILLOQUY, as a standout and one that is "required listening for industry leaders and listeners alike."

Garrett holds a Bachelor of Music in Bassoon from the University of Memphis, where he studied with Lecolion Washington, and a Master of Music in Bassoon from the University of Southern California, where he studied with Judith Farmer. In addition to working as the Executive Producer and co-host of the TRILLOQUY podcast and President of TrillWerks Media, Garrett works as an equity consultant, guest speaker, curator, and presenter at the intersection of race and "classical" music. He serves on the board of the American Composers Forum as the Equity Committee Chair, and maintains leadership/advisory positions with the Black Opera Alliance, the Gateways Music Festival, and the Lakes Area Music Festival. Off the clock, Garrett spends most of his free time with his friend and podcast co-host, Scott Blankenship, and his boyfriend, Dell.



Multidisciplinary Artist, Activist, and Executive/Artistic Director at The Carpetbag Theatre, Inc., **Jonathan Clark**, also known as “Courageous,” serves as a board member of the Network of Ensemble Theaters and as Co-Chair of the Board of Directors of Alternate ROOTS. Jonathan is a native son of Knoxville, TN, and Alumnus of the University of Tennessee – Knoxville, whose professional performance career began at the age of thirteen with

Carpetbag’s T.R.Y. Youth Theatre Ensemble, and he’s remained a working performance artist ever since; traveling the country performing original poetry, acting, facilitating workshops and immersing himself in as much culture as the United States has to offer.



Brandon Coffey, is a Knoxville native and earned his Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance from Carson Newman University and also served as a staff accompanist there from 2013-2016. Currently he serves as accompanist at First Baptist Church in Knoxville, TN.

Additionally, he frequently accompanies both singers and musicians in concert performances, events, and musicals. He is also a piano instructor at LeGrand Music Studios.



Sierra Hammond is a native Soprano from Dallas, Texas. She received her Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy from the illustrious HBCU, Oakwood University in 2014. She continued her educational pursuits at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville where she received her Master of Music. During her time in Knoxville, she was actively involved in the University of Tennessee Opera Theatre and Knoxville Opera companies. Here, she

participated in *La Boheme* (Puccini), *The Crucible* (Ward), *Don Giovanni* (Mozart), *The Consul* (Menotti), *Mefistofele* (Boito), and *Il ritorno d'ulisse in patria* (Monteverdi).

Sierra has been actively involved with Opera Huntsville since 2018 where she currently serves as the company Production Manager, previously as the Board President. In the Fall of 2019, Sierra made her stage directorial debut with Opera Huntsville directing Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*. Sierra has participated in various productions with Opera Huntsville since the company's inception such as *The True Story of Cinderella* (Warren) as *The Queen and Stepsister Two*, *Gilbert and Sullivan in Rocket City* as *Tart 2*, *Bremen Town Musicians* as *Barcolle*.

Currently she is faculty at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University (Normal, Alabama) in the Vocal Studies Area. Sierra resides in Huntsville, AL.

Bios (cast)

Name/Voice: Jayme Alilaw, soprano
Hometown: Atlanta, GA/ Originally from San Fernando Valley, CA
**Opera Companies/
Symphonies:** Atlanta Opera, Capitol City Opera, Edgewood
Saxophone Trio, BCE Productions, Dad's Garage
Theatre, Needtheater, OperaWorks

Name/Voice: Breyon Ewing, tenor
Hometown: Knoxville, TN
Opera Companies: Marble City Opera, Knoxville Opera, University of
Tennessee Opera Theater
Symphonies: Oak Ridge Philharmonia

Name/Voice: Jacob Lay, bass-baritone
Hometown: Atlanta, GA
**Opera Companies/
Symphonies:** Marble City Opera, Cedar Rapids Opera Theatre,
Simpson Productions, University of Tennessee Opera
Theatre.

Name/Voice: Benjamin Burney, tenor
Hometown: Youngstown, Ohio
**Opera Companies/
Symphonies:** *City Lyric Opera, Octopus Theatricals, Cedar Rapids
Opera Theatre, River Singing Productions, Folks
Operetta, Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Company,
Indianapolis Opera, Il Coro Sinfonico di Milano
Giuseppe Verdi, Carmel Symphony Orchestra, Anderson
Symphonic Orchestra, Opera Western Reserve

**Upcoming*

Name/Voice: Maurice Hendricks, baritone
Hometown: Knoxville, TN
**Opera Companies
/Symphonies:** GLOW Lyric Theater, Knoxville Opera, Marble City
Opera, Converse Opera Theater, Carson-Newman Lyric
Theater, Spartanburg Repertory Company, Spartanburg
Philharmonic Orchestra, Knoxville Symphony Orchestra

Name/Voice: Laura Thomason, mezzo-soprano
Hometown: Lexington, South Carolina
**Opera Companies/
Symphonies:** GLOW Lyric Theatre, Mosaic Arts, Harrower Summer
Opera Workshop, Bassi Brugnattelli Symposium,
Operafestival di Roma

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