

# JOSEPHINE

BY TOM CIPULLO

Manna  
Jones

Brandon  
Coffer

THE GROVE THEATRE

MAY 30, 2026

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TOM CIPULLO'S

# *Josephine*

## *Cast and Creative Team*

Josephine Baker

Manna K. Jones

Stage Director

Kathryn Frady

Music Director

Brandon Coffey

Stage Manager

Faith Nevarez

## *Synopsis*

**Josephine by Tom Cipullo** is a one-woman opera about the legendary entertainer Josephine Baker, set in the final years of her life.

As she prepares for a comeback performance in Paris, Josephine reflects on her extraordinary journey—from poverty in St. Louis to international stardom in France. Through a series of memories, she revisits her rise to fame, her experiences with racism in America, her role as a spy for the French Resistance during World War II, and her deep commitment to civil rights and her “Rainbow Tribe” of adopted children.

The opera blends glamour with vulnerability, revealing a woman who was both a dazzling icon and a deeply complex human being, grappling with legacy, identity, and the cost of a life lived in the spotlight.



Manna K. Jones, soprano

American Soprano, is known for her dramatic brilliance across opera and Classical music as well as Musical Theater. Hailed by the Boston Observer as “elegant and supple-voiced” Herodias in Heartbeat Opera’s Salome, she has appeared internationally as Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte* and made her Broadway debut in *Rocktopia*, a Classical Revolution. Manna is featured in the Naxos documentary film, *Global Wagner - From Bayreuth to the World* for her work as Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*. Last season she made her debut with Union Avenue Opera in St. Louis as Josephine Baker in the one-woman opera about the icon’s fascinating life.

Among her many other career highlights are riveting title-role portrayals of Cio-cio San in Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* at Carnegie Hall and Suor Angelica with the California Opera Association. Additionally, Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, Micaëla in *Carmen* at Lincoln Center, and Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* with Washington Opera Society.

Manna’s American Opera roles have been portrayals of prominent Black historical women figures such as Margaret Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington and Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine by Pulitzer Prize winning composer, Tania León. This, just after playing Essie Robeson in the world premiere of Adolphus Hailstork’s *Robeson: The Opera* with at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

Manna’s distinguished honors include awards and recognitions from: Talents of the World, Inc., Riccardo Zandonai International Competition, Paris Opera Awards, Benjamin Mathews, Opera Birmingham, Art Song Preservation Society, and the International Thespian Festival. She is also winner of an American Prize for Opera and Mid-South District Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. When Manna sang for Marilyn Horne, the legendary mezzo-soprano pronounced her voice, “An incredible instrument.”



Kathryn Frady, stage director

Critically acclaimed stage director Kathryn Frady has worked throughout the United States, Europe, and South Africa. As Executive Artistic Director of Marble City Opera, Kathryn has produced and directed more than 35 new productions and world-premieres. She won "Most Memorable Opera in Knoxville" for productions in 2014, 2017, and 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, and most recently for her direction in the World Premiere of *The Doctor and the Devils* by Jason Overall . As a leading pioneer in producing opera in alternative spaces, Kathryn's recent production of *Gallantry* was praised by Arts Knoxville, who wrote, "Kudos to Stage Director Kathryn Frady for an accomplishment that reminded the audience what theatre is all about." Kathryn was also named among the "10 Women who make a Difference in Knoxville" by the Knoxville Mercury newspaper. In 2019, A Step Ahead Foundation recognized Kathryn as a Trailblazer in her field.

A passionate advocate of new works, Kathryn directed the world premiere of Larry Delinger's *Shadowlight*, which Arts Knoxville called "A Stunning Celebration of the Art and Life of Beauford Delaney" in a "marvelously immersive" production. Other credits include productions of *Die Fledermaus* at Opera Huntsville, *Glory Denied* at Cleveland Institute of Music, *Tosca* at Gulfshore Opera, *Carmen* at Varna International, *Dido and Aeneas* at Baldwin Wallace University, *Beneath Suspicion* at Marble City Opera, *Cold Sassy Tree* at Amarillo Opera, *Tosca* at North Carolina Opera, *Barber of Seville* and *L'elisir d'amore* for Wichita Grand Opera, *Barber of Seville* for Knoxville Opera, *H.M.S. Pinafore* for The Living Opera, and new opera works at Cleveland Opera Theater. International credits include work on *Carmen* for Opera Africa in Pretoria and Johannesburg, *Amelia Lost* with the Opera in the City Festival in London; and *L'elisir d'amore* for the Centre for Opera Studies in Sulmona, Italy.

Recent directing debuts include *Tragedy of Carmen* at Tulsa Opera, *Hansel & Gretel* at Wichita Grand Opera. *Hansel & Gretel* at Mobile Opera. Upcoming credits include the double bill of *Leoncavallo's Pagliacci* and *Josephine* by Tom Cipullo for Union Avenue Opera, and *La Traviata* for Spotlight on Opera.



Brandon Coffey, music director

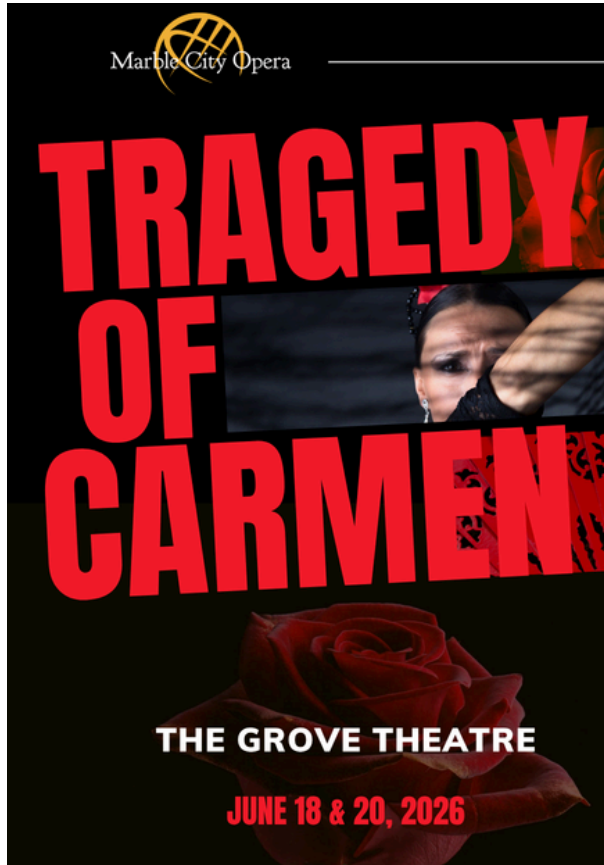
Brandon Coffey is a highly sought-after collaborative pianist and music director based in East Tennessee. A graduate of Carson Newman University with a degree in Piano Performance, he served as the university's staff accompanist from 2013 to 2016. His career spans roles as a church pianist at Bearden United Methodist Church, First Baptist Church, and now as Music Director and Organist at Central United Methodist. Brandon has also collaborated extensively with local high schools, the East Tennessee Vocal Association, and theater companies throughout the region.

Since 2013, Brandon has been the resident pianist and music director for Marble City Opera. In January 2023, he made his operatic conducting debut with Marble City Opera's production of *The Christmas Spider*, and he later led the world premiere of *The Doctor and The Devils* by Jason Overall. With his exceptional talent and unwavering dedication, Brandon continues to be a prominent figure in the East Tennessee music scene, seamlessly collaborating with a diverse range of musicians.

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