

BOSTONLYRICOPERA

THE GRIPPING TRUE STORY OF A PRIZEFIGHTING BOXER IS TOLD IN “CHAMPION: AN OPERA IN JAZZ”

From the Grammy- and Pulitzer Prize-winning, Oscar-nominated team of composer Terence Blanchard and librettist Michael Cristofer.

***Boston Lyric Opera returns to first full staging in a theater since 2019.
May 18, 20 and 22 at the Emerson Cutler Majestic Theatre.***



March 24, 2022 – BOSTON – The true story of six-time world champion prizefighter Emile Griffith is told in Boston Lyric Opera's (BLO) new production of [Champion: An Opera in Jazz](#) by Grammy Award-winning composer **Terence Blanchard** (*Fire Shut Up in My Bones*), with a libretto by Pulitzer Prize winner **Michael Cristofer**. The contemporary opera is brought to the stage by acclaimed theater director **Timothy Douglas** and award-winning conductor **Kwamé Ryan**, and will be presented for three performances on May 18, 20 and 22 at the Emerson Cutler Majestic Theater. [Tickets are available now.](#)

Champion chronicles Griffith's sweeping life story, from his beginnings in the Virgin Islands to his athletic success in America, through passionate love affairs and a tragedy that changed his life. The story is told as memories from an older

Emile with dementia who is on a journey to redeem himself from the fight that left his opponent Benny "Kid" Paret dead.

Champion's story alternates between the story of the physically strong yet gentle Young Emile, who finds success in St. Thomas as a women's hatmaker with a raucous social life before being recruited by an American boxing promoter, and an older Emile whose post-boxing life includes a long-time male companion who helps him navigate mental and physical decline, and a search for redemption.

Griffith's rise as a champion athlete ran parallel with his complex personal life; he married a woman, had sexual relationships with men, and openly frequented gay bars in 1960s New York. Whispers about Griffith became public when his opponent Benny "Kid" Paret taunted him in front of the media at a pre-match weigh-in. Enraged, Griffith dominated Paret in a brutal fight, landing a rapid series of 17 blows that ended the match and put Paret in a coma. Paret died of a brain injury soon after.

“The story of *Champion* is one of a desire to find a sense of belonging,” says Acting Stanford Calderwood General & Artistic Director **Bradley Vernatter**. “The details may be unique to Emile Griffith, but it is the story of many. Terence Blanchard’s score is a mix of styles, one that is uniquely American, and reveals the warmth of Emile’s story, and the complexities of his life.”

CHAMPION CAST

The cast of *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* includes returning artists and company debuts:

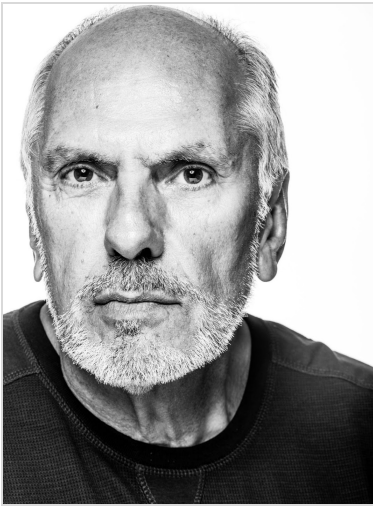
- **Brian Major** (playing Emile Griffith) who makes his BLO debut;
- **Markel Reed** (Young Emile) who makes his BLO debut;
- **Tichina Vaughn** (Emelda Griffith, Emile’s mother) who makes her BLO debut;
- **Chabrelle L. Williams** (Cousin Blanche/Sadie Griffith) who sang the lead role, Milica, in BLO’s *Svadba* and originated this role in the World Premiere cast of *Champion* at Opera Theater of Saint Louis;
- **Jesus Garcia** (Luis Rodrigo Griffith) who starred in BLO’s most recent productions of *The Barber of Seville* and *La Bohème*;
- **Todd Thomas** (promoter Howie Albert), who makes his BLO debut;
- **Stephanie Blythe** (Kathy Hagen), who makes her BLO debut with this performance and was recently cast in the Metropolitan Opera’s 2023 production of *Champion*;
- **Neal Ferreira** (Ring Announcer) a BLO Emerging Artist alumnus and veteran of many BLO productions, including the 2018 production of Leonard Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti*; and
- **Nicholas LaGesse** (Man in the Bar/Young Man), a BLO Emerging Artist.

Additional casting will be announced soon. [Full artist biographies are available here.](#)

CHAMPION ARTISTIC TEAM

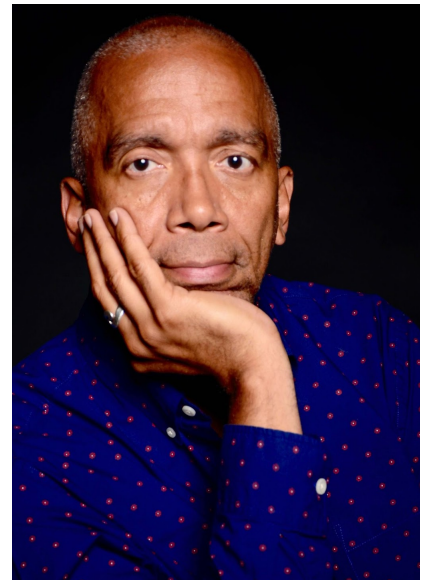


Since the Grammy-winning, Oscar-nominated jazz trumpeter and composer **Terence Blanchard** (l.) embarked on a solo recording career in 1991 with his eponymous Columbia Records album, the New Orleans-born artist has traveled many paths musically, including adventurous and provocative acoustic jazz, composing more than 50 soundtracks and debuting his first opera, *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* in 2013. Blanchard has recorded more than 30 albums, and has been a frequent collaborator and soundtrack composer for the films of director Spike Lee including Lee’s *BlackKkKlansman*, *Miracle at St. Anna* and *Da 5 Bloods*. In September 2021 he became the first Black composer to have his work, *Fire Shut Up In My Bones*, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera. His *Champion* will be seen next season at the Met.



Librettist **Michael Cristofer** (l.) is an actor and playwright who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for the Broadway production of his play, *The Shadow Box*. Among his many other plays is *Man in the Ring*, also based on the story of prize fighter Emile Griffith. *Man in the Ring* received the American Theater Critics Award for best American play in 2017. Cristofer's film work includes the screenplays for *The Shadow Box* (directed by Paul Newman), the New England-set *The Witches of Eastwick* and many others. He returned to his acting career after a 15-year hiatus and appeared in productions by New York's Public Theater, Williamstown Theater and in the Broadway revival of *A View from the Bridge* as well as numerous roles on television.

Director **Timothy Douglas** (r.) is a theater director, actor, and educator who has staged productions at some of America's finest theaters including the Berkshire Theatre Group, Arena Stage, the Kennedy Center, Yale Rep, the McCarter Theater, Steppenwolf, Woolly Mammoth Theater, Classic Stage Company, Berkeley Rep and many others. His directing work also has been seen internationally including productions of *Disgraced* at The Great Theatre of China, *Rosmersholm* at Nationaltheatre Norway, *Mules* at Downstage New Zealand, *The Three Sisters* at Toi Whakaari in New Zealand, and *Eve's Song* at Sundance Theatre Institute Morocco. Douglas is a Distinguished Artist in Residence at Emerson College and a recipient of the Lloyd Richards/National Black Theatre Festival Director Award.



Conductor **Kwamé Ryan** (l.) held leadership positions around the world including General Music Director of Freiburg Opera and Musical & Artistic Director of the National Orchestra of Bordeaux Aquitaine. As a guest conductor in Germany, Ryan led the Radio Orchestras of Baden-Baden and Freiburg, Stuttgart and Bavaria, as well as the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen and others. In France, he worked at Opéra Bastille, Opéra de Lyon, and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. In the U.K. Ryan conducted English National Opera, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and others. His work in America has found him leading orchestras in Baltimore, Dallas, Detroit, Indianapolis, Atlanta, Houston, New Jersey and Chicago. He recently conducted the National Opera of Belgium's World Premiere *The Time of Our Singing*.

Set Designer for *Champion* is **Sara Brown**. Costumes are designed by **Trevor Brown**. Lighting Designer is **Marcus Doshi**.

Other artistic team members will be announced soon. [A full list of the artistic team is here](#).

VENUE AND TICKETS

Boston Lyric Opera's *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* will be performed Wed., May. 18 @ 7:30PM, Friday May 20 @ 7:30PM and Sun., May 22 @ 3PM at the Emerson Cutler Majestic Theater, 219 Tremont Street, Boston. **Individual tickets start at \$25 (plus fees) and are available now at blo.org/champion.**

SUPPORT for CHAMPION

Champion is funded in part by grants from the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, The Amphion Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Reopen Creative Boston Fund, administered by the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture, and Mass Cultural Council, a state agency. Community engagement programming for *Champion* is supported in part by the Virginia Wellington Cabot Foundation.

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MEDIA CONTACT: For details about *Champion* and media ticket RSVPs, contact John Michael Kennedy, JMK@jmkpr.com / 781-620-1761 or Jennifer Astin, ja@jmkpr.com / 424-333-1718.