

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Press Contact: Eric Broker, Associate Communications Director, 612-342-1612, ebroker@mnopera.org

## MN OPERA COMMISSIONS NEW OPERA FOR YOUTH TRAINING PROGRAM BASED ON BOOK BY KAO KALIA YANG

**MINNEAPOLIS (April 1, 2019)** – Today Minnesota Opera announces the commission of *The Song Poet* for Project Opera, Minnesota Opera’s premier youth vocal training program.

In concert with the creation of this new opera based on the award-winning book by Hmong-American writer and St. Paul, MN resident Kao Kalia Yang, Minnesota Opera will build its capacity to develop a civic practice with the local Hmong-American community through a Civic Practice Grant supported by OPERA America’s Opera Fund endowment. Through a conversation series co-created with project partners, the company will listen and learn about the pressing needs of this community and how its own expertise and resources might be a support.

Winner of the 2017 Minnesota Book Award in Creative Nonfiction, Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Song Poet* tells the life story of Kalia, her family and her father, Bee Yang, the song poet—a Hmong refugee in Minnesota, driven from the mountains of Laos by America’s Secret War. Through his poetry, Bee sings the life of his people from the war-torn jungle and a Thai refugee camp. The songs fall away in the cold, bitter world of a St. Paul housing project and on the factory floor, until, with the death of Bee’s mother, they leave him for good. But before he loses his storytelling gift, Bee burnishes a life of poverty for his children, polishing their grim reality so that they might shine. According to Kao Kalia Yang, “*The Song Poet* is me taking on my father’s story and his songs; it is a tribute to his form, *kwv txhiaj*, and the poetry that has sheltered us from the poverty of our lives.”

The opera adaptation of the popular book will focus on a daughter learning who her father is and their experience in Minnesota. “To see *The Song Poet* as a youth opera is something I didn’t know how to dream of—the Hmong story had never been translated onto the operatic stage,” said Kao Kalia Yang. “I believe this opera will push the boundaries of the form and the dreams of my people and new Americans everywhere who live and love the arts in a positive and necessary direction. *The Song Poet* speaks to so many of the big themes of the best operas I’ve seen: the tumult of war; the loneliness of yearning for a parent that is not there; the desperate journey to find a true and passionate love; the gifts we give, in the words of my father Bee Yang, my inspiration for the book, ‘when all we have to offer the world are our stories and our tears.’ I hope opera lovers— young and old and everywhere—will cheer for the coming of *The Song Poet* to Minnesota Opera.”

The opera will have its world premiere in May 2021 at the Lab Theater with Rick Shiomi as stage director.

---

### More about *The Song Poet* author Kao Kalia Yang

Kao Kalia Yang is a Hmong-American writer from St. Paul, MN. She is the author of *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Coffee House Press, 2008), winner of two 2009 Minnesota Book Awards in Creative Nonfiction/Memoir and Readers Choice and a finalist for the PEN USA Award in Creative Nonfiction and the Asian Literary Award in Nonfiction. Her second book, *The Song Poet* (Metropolitan Books, 2016) won the 2016 Minnesota Book Award in Creative



Administrative: 612-333-2700

Patron Services: 612-333-6669

Fax: 612-333-0869

Nonfiction Memoir. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Chautauqua Prize, a PEN USA Award in Nonfiction and the Dayton's Literary Peace Prize. Yang is also a teacher and a public speaker.

#### More about stage director Rick Shiomi

Rick Shiomi is an internationally recognized, award-winning Japanese Canadian playwright, stage director, artistic director and taiko artist, and a major player in the Asian American/Canadian theater movement. He is best known for his groundbreaking play *Yellow Fever*, which earned him the Bay Area Theater Circle Critics Award and "Bernie" Award. Over the last couple decades, Shiomi has also become a notable artistic and stage director. He directed the world premiere of the play *Caught by Christopher Chen* for which he received the Philadelphia Barrymore Award Nomination for Outstanding Direction. He is currently the co-artistic director of Full Circle Theater Company.

#### More about Project Opera

Project Opera, a training program for students in grades 4-12, is the centerpiece of Minnesota Opera's expanding education program for young singers. Project Opera fosters a healthy vocal technique, exposes students to repertoire in the major operatic languages and instills the fundamentals of acting technique throughout the year-long program. Founded in 2004, the group performs one opera per year.

#### More about the New Works Initiative

*The Song Poet* is a part of Minnesota Opera's New Works Initiative. A pioneering movement in new opera when it was launched in 2008, Minnesota Opera's New Works Initiative was designed to invigorate the operatic art form with an infusion of contemporary works, and formalize the company's commitment to artistic growth, leadership and innovation. *The Song Poet* is the follow up to Project Opera's commissions of *The Giver* and *Memory Boy*.

###

Minnesota Opera changes lives by bringing together artists, audiences and community, advancing the art of opera for today and for future generations.