

Pittsburgh Opera Director Hahn promotes Josh Gibson Story

Christian Morrow



WORLD PREMIERE—Pittsburgh Opera Director Christopher Hahn tells PowerBreakfast attendees about the upcoming original \$1.8 million production of The Summer King, the Josh Gibson story. (Photo by J.L. Martello)

In the western movie “Silverado,” former Monty Python founder John Cleese tells Scott Glenn, in his customary English accent, “As you may have gathered, I am not from these parts.”

Christopher Hahn, director of the Pittsburgh Opera for the last 18 years, made a similar confession while promoting the opera and its upcoming world premiere of “The Summer King” The Josh Gibson Story.



CHRISTOPHER HAHN

“As you can tell, I’m not from here. I am from South Africa, where we had two sports: cricket and soccer,” he said. “So this thing called baseball was completely foreign to me. We also had a complicated system of apartheid. But I didn’t know about this complicated relationship between sports and the Black community.”

In his capacity as director, Hahn said he has tried to make the Pittsburgh Opera more accessible to younger, newer audiences by presenting modern operas—especially American operas written in English, such as those based on stories such as “The Grapes of Wrath,” “Dead Man Walking,” and “Billy Budd.”

“I’m here to dispel the stereotype that ‘opera isn’t for me’ because its a lot of large, unattractive people singing in some foreign language I don’t understand,” he said. “But

we'd never been part of producing a new opera until now, so we needed to find something that would resonate with this city."

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"The Summer King" Hahn explained, was a name given to Gibson by adoring fans in Mexico, where most Negro League stars played in the winter. There is a whole section of the opera that takes place in Mexico, as it ranges from the sandlots of the North Side to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Christian Morrow

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DORIS CARSON WILLIAMS and CHRISTOPHER HAHN

"It was written by a local guy, Daniel Sonenberg, a jazz drummer who became obsessed with Josh's story," he said. "Why did he miss the boat? Why wasn't he—the greatest homerun hitter ever, the only guy, it's said, who ever hit a ball out of the old Yankee Stadium—Why wasn't he Jackie Robinson?"

Luckily, thanks to the Josh Gibson Foundation, and the photographs of Charles "Teenie" Harris, the opera has a wealth of imagery and family history to draw on. Hahn also acknowledged the Courier as part of that history, and noted that one of the principal characters in the Opera is Courier sports reporter Wendell Smith.

In addition to Smith and Gibson, other historical characters in the production include Cool Papa Bell, Sam Bankhead, Gus Greenlee, and Helen Gibson.

And in a special Pittsburgh touch, a scene that takes place in the Crawford Grill will include cameo appearances by Pittsburgh Pirate World Series winners Al Oliver and Manny Sanquillen, and Pittsburgh Steeler Super Bowl winners Franco Harris and Rocky Blier.

"In addition to the cast, there are original sets, costumes, a 60-piece orchestra and a large chorus that bring this colorful, vibrant world to life, which is why the World premiere will cost us about \$1.8 million," he said. "It's a massive challenge and we're only having four performances—one, though is a matinee and we'll be bringing in school kids for that. So we'll have hundreds of screaming children learning about what happened just up the street."