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**CHICAGO OPERA THEATER TO PRESENT THE CHICAGO PREMIERE OF
DUKE ELLINGTON'S "QUEENIE PIE" FEBRUARY 15 – MARCH 5 AT THE
HARRIS THEATER**

Ellington's Only Opera Presented in Partnership with Chicago Jazz Orchestra

CHICAGO – In one of its most ambitious projects to date, Chicago Opera Theater (COT) will collaborate with the Chicago Jazz Orchestra (CJO) to present the Chicago premiere of **Duke Ellington's** only opera "**Queenie Pie**," running February 15 – March 5 at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph Street. Tickets (\$35 - \$125) are now on sale.

Featuring a rousing musical score that blends Ellington's signature big band sound and clever lyrics with the musical styles of opera, jazz and musical theater, the opera will be conducted by CJO Artistic Director **Jeff Lindberg**, with direction and choreography by **Ken Roht**. Originally commissioned by New York PBS affiliate WNET as a television piece for Lena Horne and featuring a libretto by Betty McGettigan, "**Queenie Pie**" was unfinished at the time of the Ellington's death in 1974. Chicago Opera Theater's production, like the handful of productions mounted by other companies in the past, interpolates additional songs from Ellington's canon to complete the score, and features a new adaptation of the libretto by Ken Roht, as well as new orchestrations by Jeff Lindberg.

"**Queenie Pie**' is a neglected gem, fascinating musically, dramatically and historically," said Andreas Mitisek, COT's General Director. "In keeping with our mission of producing adventurous opera experiences, particularly new and rarely performed work, we are excited to bring Chicago audiences a largely unknown piece by one of America's greatest composers."

Ellington's "street opera" tells a story inspired by the life of Madam C. J. Walker, the first female African-American self-made millionaire, who developed and sold a line of hair and beauty products. Queenie Pie's business is challenged by competing entrepreneur Café Au Lait, a younger, light-skinned beauty from New Orleans. Set in the Harlem Renaissance, the story has been refocused for COT's production by the creative team. "The goal is to contemporize the piece, and also to make the piece timeless, while dealing with challenging social issues that seem to persist," says Director/Choreographer Ken Roht.

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Reviewing a 1986 production of the opera, Robert Palmer, writing for the New York Times, called "Queenie Pie" a "wonderfully vital and coherent work. In fact, it is something of a marvel. One could justifiably call it a comic opera, since the narrative is advanced primarily through song and recitative... a superior evening's entertainment, but, more importantly, it is an evening worthy of Duke Ellington's talents."

Los Angeles-based director and choreographer Ken Roht has staged Long Beach Opera's productions of Poulenc's "The Breasts of Tiresias," Bohuslav Martinu's "Tears of a Knife" and Robert Kurka's "The Good Soldier Schweik." Roht relishes the opportunity to work on "Queenie Pie" saying, "It is an honor to lend my perspective to the original libretto...It remains an ebullient melodrama due to Mr. Ellington's amazing, multi-faceted music and the story's dreamlike, highly allegorical plot of two vastly different women, who are very much the same."

Queenie Pie is the second co-production shared between Chicago Opera Theater and Long Beach Opera, both of which are under the direction of Andreas Mitisek.

The cast of "Queenie Pie" includes **Karen Marie Richardson**, best known for her Chicago performances in "Too Hot to Handel: The Jazz Gospel Messiah" in the title role; **Anna Bowen** as Café O'lay; **Keithon Gipson** as Holt Faye/King; and **Jeffrey Polk** as Lil' Daddy. The conductor is CJO Artistic Director Jeffrey Lindberg; stage direction and choreography is by Ken Roht. The design team includes Danila Korogodsky (sets); Brandon Baruch (lights) and Dabney Ross Jones (costumes).

About Duke Ellington

Duke Ellington called his music "American Music" rather than jazz, and liked to describe those who impressed him as "beyond category." He remains one of the most influential figures in jazz, if not in all American music, giving American music its own sound for the first time. In his fifty year career, he played over 20,000 performances in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East as well as Asia.

Ellington is best remembered for the more than 3,000 songs that he composed during his lifetime. His best known titles include "It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got That Swing", "Sophisticated Lady," "Mood Indigo," "Solitude," "In a Mellotone" and "Satin Doll." When asked what inspired him to write, Ellington replied, "My men and my race are the inspiration of my work. I try to catch the character and mood and feeling of my people."

Duke Ellington's popular compositions set the bar for generations of brilliant jazz, pop, theatre and soundtrack composers to come. While these compositions guarantee his greatness, what makes Ellington an iconoclastic genius, and an unparalleled visionary, what has granted him immortality, are his extended suites. From 1943's "Black, Brown and Beige" to 1972's "Uwis Suite," Ellington used the suite format to give his jazz songs a far more empowering meaning, resonance and purpose: to exalt, mythologize and re-contextualize the African-American experience on a grand scale.

Ellington was awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1966. He was later awarded several other prizes, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969, and the Legion of Honor by France in 1973, the highest civilian honors in each country. He died of lung cancer and pneumonia on May 24, 1974, a month after his 75th birthday, and is buried in the Bronx, in New York City. At his funeral, attended by over 12,000 people at

the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Ella Fitzgerald summed up the occasion, "It's a very sad day...A genius has passed." (*Excerpted from Dukeellington.com*)

Performance Schedule and Ticket Information

"Queenie Pie" will be performed at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph, Feb. 15 at 7:30 p.m.; Feb. 21 at 7:30 p.m.; Feb. 23 at 3 p.m. and March 5 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are priced from \$35 - \$125 and can be purchased by calling 312.704.8414 or via chicagooperatheater.org. Tickets also can be purchased at the Harris Theater box office. The running time is 90 minutes, including one intermission.

About Chicago Opera Theater

Chicago Opera Theater (COT) is an innovative, nationally recognized opera company that engages a curious audience through adventurous opera experiences of new and rarely performed works. COT, established in 1974 by Alan Stone, is a founding resident company of the Harris Theater for Music and Dance in Millennium Park. New General Director Andreas Mitisek is known for his adventurous repertory, visionary leadership, fundraising skills, and innovative audience-building initiatives.

Chicago Opera Theater has carved a significant place for itself in the operatic life of Chicago and has reached an audience of hundreds of thousands through its main stage performances, community engagement, education programs in Chicago Public Schools, as well as its renowned Young Artist Program.

Experience **MORE OF THE DIFFERENT** with Chicago Opera Theater!

For more information on the Chicago Opera Theater and its programs please visit www.chicagooperatheater.org.