

February 15, 2017

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Pittsburgh Opera presents the world premiere of The Summer King – the Josh Gibson Story

What:	<i>World premiere</i> of Daniel Sonenberg’s The Summer King – The Josh Gibson Story . Libretto by Daniel Sonenberg and Daniel Nester , with additional lyrics by Mark Campbell .
Where:	Benedum Center for the Performing Arts, 237 7th Street, Pittsburgh
When:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sat, Apr 29, 2017 * 8:00 PM • Tue, May 2, 2017 * 7:00 PM • Fri, May 5, 2017 * 7:30 PM • Sun, May 7, 2017 * 3:00 PM <p><i>ALSO: Thursday, May 4th: Student Matinee performance at 10:30 AM</i></p>
Run Time:	2 hours, 12 minutes, including two intermissions
Language:	Sung in English with English texts projected above the stage
Tickets:	Tickets start at just \$12. Group Discounts available. Call 412-456-6666 for more information or visit pittsburghopera.org/tickets .
Media Events	<p>Please contact ccox@pittsburghopera.org for reservations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photo Call (Monday, April 10th, 12:30 PM) – location TBD • Full Dress Rehearsal (Thursday, April 27th, 7:00 PM), Benedum
Related Events See pages 8-11 of this release.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Engagement events (February and April) • Brown Bag Concert (April 1st) • Opera Up Close (April 9th) • WQED Preview (April 22nd & 28th) • “Creating an Opera” (April 23rd) • Meet the Artists (May 2nd) • Audio Commentary (May 2nd)

The Summer King – the Josh Gibson Story ***World Premiere***

by [Daniel Sonenberg](#)

Libretto by [Daniel Sonenberg](#) and [Daniel Nester](#), with additional lyrics by [Mark Campbell](#)

Based on the life of baseball Hall of Famer Josh Gibson

Sung in English with English texts projected above the stage



Concept Drawing of staging by [Andrew Lieberman](#)

Pittsburgh, PA

Pittsburgh Opera's 2016-17 season concludes with the first world premiere in our illustrious 78-year history. Opera lovers, baseball fans, and Pittsburghers of all stripes will be dazzled by Daniel Sonenberg's **The Summer King - the Josh Gibson Story**, at the Benedum Center April 29th – May 7th.

As baseball fans and proud Pittsburgh history enthusiasts know, Josh went from the sandlots of Pittsburgh's North Side to the pinnacle of greatness on the baseball diamond in the Negro Leagues, before ultimately being enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

The opera begins with a father and son debating about great baseball players. When the father mentions Josh Gibson, the son thinks his father is living in the past. But as his father retorts, "Who's got those numbers today?"

The Summer King follows Josh at key points in his life, including his playing days in the Negro Leagues as well as in Mexico, where he was awarded the MVP award while playing for the Veracruz Azules. The robust supporting characters include his wife Helen, who dies in childbirth, his girlfriend Grace, sung by the legendary Denyce Graves in her Pittsburgh Opera debut, and teammates such as Sam Bankhead and Cool Papa Bell.

Also featured in prominent roles are the gregarious Gus Greenlee, who owned not just the Pittsburgh Crawfords but also the legendary Crawford Grill in Pittsburgh's Hill District, and Wendell Smith, an intrepid reporter for the celebrated African American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*.

Like all African Americans at the time, Josh was prohibited from playing in the Major Leagues by what was disingenuously referred to as a "gentlemen's agreement" among the Major League clubs. Sadly, Josh died at the age of 35, felled by a stroke shortly before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Pittsburgh Opera is proud and privileged to premiere **The Summer King**, Josh Gibson's story.

Pittsburgh Opera's annual Student Matinee will introduce 2,600+ school children grades 3-12 to this lively, colorful opera on Thursday, May 4th at the Benedum Center.

Josh Gibson™ used with permission of Josh Gibson Enterprise, Inc., c/o Luminary Group LLC, www.JoshGibson.org

The Summer King was commissioned by [Portland Ovations](#), with development by [American Opera Projects](#) and deeply appreciated continuing support for the Pittsburgh Opera world premiere from the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#). **The Summer King** has received major support from [American Opera Projects](#), the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), [Bob Crewe Foundation](#), [Maine Arts Commission](#) and [University of Southern Maine](#). **The Summer King** received its first public presentation as a concert performance on May 8, 2014 at Merrill Auditorium, Portland, Maine under the auspices of [Portland Ovations](#) in collaboration with the [University of Southern Maine](#). Pittsburgh Opera is developing it into a fully-staged production, with lighting, costumes, sets, a full orchestra in the pit, and so forth for its world premiere in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh Opera has also worked with the composer to develop additional material for the world premiere.

Fascinating Facts about The Summer King

1. For crusading *Pittsburgh Courier* journalist Wendell Smith, seeing baseball's color barrier broken had an extra level of significance. In college, a major league scout told Smith he wished that he could sign him, but couldn't due to the color barrier.
2. Five Pittsburgh sports legends will appear as supernumeraries in one or more performances of **The Summer King**. Former Pirates Al Oliver and Sean Casey, and former Steelers Franco Harris, Rocky Bleier and Charlie Batch's participation symbolizes that while Josh's athletic greatness may have gone unnoticed by much of the white public in his day, Pittsburgh's sports heroes recognize him as one of their own.
3. Many of Josh's descendants are alive and well, and still live in Pittsburgh. Great-grandson Sean Gibson is the Executive Director of [The Josh Gibson Foundation](#), which develops programs that help children of every ability level reach their potential.

4. Pittsburgh Opera chorister Skip Napier's grandfather [Eudie Napier](#) was Josh's teammate on the 1946 Homestead Grays. Skip, a baritone, is a classically trained singer.

The story, in brief

ACT I

SCENE 1 Cut Off Man barbershop, Brooklyn, NY, 1957

Boys playing stickball hit a ball into a barbershop. When the radio plays "Did Ya See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball?," the Elder and Younger Barbers argue about the Negro League and the legacy of Josh Gibson. The Elder Barber remembers Gibson's incredible accomplishments and describes the day that Gibson hit a ball completely out of Yankee Stadium.

SCENE 2 Yankee Stadium, NY, 1930

The Elder Barber imagines a Radio Announcer describing the epic battle between pitcher Broadway Connie Rector and a young Josh Gibson.

SCENE 3 A park in Homestead, PA, 1930

Spectators respond to Josh's tremendous home run. Helen, his young wife, arrives with blackberry pie. They look forward to their future (*Beautiful Afternoon*) and Helen tells Josh that she's pregnant. A musical interlude turns dark. Josh sadly reflects on Helen's death giving birth to their twin children and his commitment to his remaining love—the game of baseball.

SCENE 4 Crawford Grill, Pittsburgh, PA, 1935

Players and fans of the Pittsburgh Crawfords celebrate and praise Mr. Gus Greenlee, owner of both the Crawford Grill and the team. Josh arrives with Hattie, and Wendell Smith, from *The Pittsburgh Courier*, introduces himself to Josh. The daily number is called. Grace is the winner; she bet 440, which was Josh's batting average the previous season. Smith suggests that with numbers like that, Josh might make history by playing for a white team and breaking the color barrier, an idea his teammates, led by Double Duty Radcliffe, disdain. Josh and his teammates scoff at Smith's idea, but Josh is secretly intrigued by it. Grace persuades him to consider it.

SCENE 5 Wendell Smith's office, *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 1938

Wendell "Smitty" Smith asks Josh to consider working together to break the color barrier. Smith recalls his experience with segregation in college and admits that he was never "lightning" like Josh. Smith says Josh could change everything. Josh commits to think about it.

SCENE 6 Josh's apartment, Pittsburgh, PA, March 1938

Josh and Grace, now a couple, return from a night on the town. She scolds him, describes his greatness, and urges him to broaden his dreams.

SCENE 7 Owner's office, Griffith Stadium, Washington, DC, April 1940

Clark Griffith and his nephew meet with Josh and dangle the notion of playing for the Senators. The meeting has clearly been set up to appease the black press. After complimenting Josh's skills, they warn him about the consequences of playing in the majors. The exchange grows threatening (*Men such as we*). The Griffiths pompously describe their responsibility and their foremost concern with Josh's best interests, making it clear they have no intention of signing him. Clark walks Josh to the door and tells him, "Boy, there's a colored facility at the top of the stairs."

SCENE 8 Outside the Griffith Office, and Crawford Grill, April 1940

Josh, demoralized and frustrated, says all he ever wanted was his wife Helen and the game. He arrives at the Crawford Grill, where players are discussing a lucrative offer from Mexico that hinges on Josh's participation. Smith wants Josh to stay and fight, but Josh eagerly accepts the deal (*Hello Mexico*). Grace agrees, "as long as it's temporary."

INTERMISSION

ACT II

SCENE 1 Escambron Stadium, Vera Cruz, Mexico, October 1941

During a celebration featuring Mexican music, Josh is heralded as player of the year by Señor Alcalde. Sam tells Josh about an offer from back home matching the Mexican pay they receive. Grace is excited to return home, but Josh celebrates the good life the players enjoy in Mexico. As the revelers leave, Grace tells Josh that she's not staying in Mexico. Hattie, now with Double Duty Radcliffe, shares a joint with Josh as he and his friends celebrate "high living." Josh complains that his head isn't feeling so well, and as the celebration begins to spin out of control, Josh proclaims his need to go home, and then loses his balance and collapses.

SCENE 2 Wendell Smith's office, Pittsburgh Courier, March 1945

Branch Rickey tells Smith that he is proudly ready to hire a black player for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey needs someone "with the spirit to fight back, but ... the guts not to." Smith tells Rickey, "I may have a name for you."

SCENE 3 An empty ballfield, Homestead, PA, October 1945

Josh, looking haggard and bloated, stands alone on a field hitting balls, lamenting that nothing's changed for him in the four years since Mexico, and then expresses agony at something pressed against his head. Players, including Sam Bankhead, engage in a pickup game. Trash Talking Player takes a turn at bat with Josh catching behind him. The two trade insults, with Josh eventually getting the better of the situation. Sam urges the younger players to respect Josh, and describes his famous Yankee Stadium home run. Wendell Smith then arrives, excitedly telling the news that Jackie Robinson has been hired by the Dodgers. Josh is crestfallen (*I got my own league*).

SCENE 4 Crawford Grill (now closed), October 1945

Josh has busted into the old Crawford Grill, bringing his own beer cans. Grace chides Josh for being too caught up in his "own league," asking him, "You think you can drink your way into the big leagues?" Josh talks of imaginary conversations with Joe DiMaggio. Grace tells him that her husband is returning from war, and that she is leaving. She describes the

dreams she had of transcending her dreary existence in a loveless marriage with few material comforts; she realizes that she has to face her real life and abandon her fantasies for Josh—fantasies he never shared.

SCENE 5 Josh's bedroom, Homestead, PA, January 1947

Josh speaks intently to an imaginary Joe DiMaggio, asking “You ain’t gonna answer me?” Josh says that he will die that night. Sam pays his respects to his dying friend and tells him that Jackie Robinson is going to join the Dodgers. They listen to the news on the radio as Josh withdraws into his own delirium. Helen’s ghost visits and the two remember their hopes for a bright future (*Beautiful Afternoon*). Helen disappears. Josh realizes where he is and speaks to Sam about his fabled Yankee Stadium home run: “It went out a long way . . . I hope you’ll remember that.” Josh dies. Sam remembers the fallen Summer King, who led all Negro Leaguers to the Promised Land, but was denied entry himself. He then contemplates his own plight, and that of his contemporaries—players who were either too old, or not great enough, to enjoy the fruits of integration. The Elder Barber extolls Josh Gibson’s greatness as Sam wonders about fate, asking “Did we need to be greater men than our king to avoid our king’s fate?”

SCENE 6 Cut Off Man barbershop, Brooklyn, NY, 1957

The Elder and Younger Barbers continue their argument until the Younger Barber puts on “the damn game.”

EPILOGUE Outside Yankee Stadium, NY, 1930

Children play stickball outside Yankee Stadium. The Radio Announcer calls the legendary home run. The bat cracks and the Streets Kids freeze, looking straight up to the sky, asking “Where’d it go? Is it fair?” The kids scatter and one boy emerges with the baseball (*Did ya see?*).

– *Synopsis adapted from Daniel Sonenberg*

For additional information, videos, musical samples, and cast biographies, visit <http://www.pittsburghopera.org/show/the-summer-king>.

Tickets and Group Discounts

- Tickets to **The Summer King** start at just \$12
- All performances are at the Benedum Center, 237 7th Street, in downtown Pittsburgh
- To purchase tickets, call 412-456-6666, visit the Theatre Square Box Office, or buy online at https://opera.culturaldistrict.org/production/47945/list_performances.
- Group discounts are available. For discounted group tickets (6 or more), contact Regina Connolly at 412-281-0912, x 213

Sponsors

- The 2016-17 Pittsburgh Opera season is generously supported by [PNC](#)
- Production Sponsor: [People's Natural Gas](#)
- Season Media Sponsor: [WQED-FM](#)
- Tuesday performance sponsor: [Ambridge Regional Distribution and Manufacturing Center](#).



- Student Matinee sponsor: [EQT Foundation](#). The EQT Foundation is the philanthropic arm of EQT Corporation, and is committed to the social and economic vitality of its operating regions. For more than a decade, the EQT Foundation has made a difference by supporting local programs and initiatives that involve education, community and economic development, diversity, the arts, and the environment. Together with a variety of non-profit organizations, the EQT Foundation develops strong partnerships that enrich our communities, sustain the principles of continuous learning and understanding, and focus on environmental protection efforts.

- Select community events received funding from [OPERA America's Opera Fund](#)

THE NATIONAL **OPERA** CENTER
AMERICA

Cast and Artistic Team: *The Summer King*

Josh Gibson	Alfred Walker ⁺
Grace	Denyce Graves ⁺
Wendell Smith	Sean Pannikar ^{**}
Sam Bankhead	Kenneth Kellogg ⁺
Gus Greenlee, Elder Barber	Norman Shankle ⁺
Hattie	Jasmine Muhammad ^{**}
Helen Gibson	Jacqueline Echols ⁺
Cool Papa Bell	Phillip Gay ^{**}
Dave Hoskins	Kyle Oliver ^{**}
Judy Johnson	Robert Mack ⁺
Double Duty Radcliffe	Terrence Chin-Loy ⁺
Branch Rickey, Clark Griffith	Raymond Very
Calvin Griffith	Brian Vu [*]
Senor Alcade	Eric Ferring [*]
Girlfriend	Taylor Raven [*]
Trash Talking Player, Scribe	Martin Bakari
Mariachi Singer 1	George Milosh
Mariachi Singer 2	Robert Spondike
Mariachi Singer 3	Scott Cuva

Conductor	Antony Walker
Stage Director	Sam Helfrich
Scenery and Properties Designer	Andrew Lieberman
Costume Designer	Kay Voyce
Video Designer	Darrel Maloney
Lighting Designer	Robert Wierzel
Asst. Conductor	Glenn Lewis
Chorus Master	Mark Trawka
Associate Coach/Pianist	James Lesniak

- + Pittsburgh Opera debut
- * Pittsburgh Opera Resident Artist
- ** Pittsburgh Opera Resident Artist alumnus/alumna

Celebrity Special Guests

Josh Gibson deserved to be as famous in his day as Babe Ruth or Lou Gehrig. But he was overlooked by the mainstream white media because of the color of his skin.

These Pittsburgh sports legends are appearing as supernumeraries in **The Summer King**. Their participation symbolizes that while Josh's athletic greatness may have gone unnoticed by much of the general public, Pittsburgh's sports heroes recognize him as one of their own.

Pittsburgh Opera and the Josh Gibson Foundation are grateful to the following people for supporting **The Summer King** by appearing as supernumeraries:

- [Al "Scoop" Oliver](#)
- [Sean Casey](#)
- [Charlie Batch](#)
- [Franco Harris](#)
- [Rocky Bleier](#)

Related Events for The Summer King

Additional events being added, check pittsburghopera.org for updates

Free Community Event at The Pittsburgh Project

February 22 @ 6:30 PM

Pittsburgh Project, 2801 N Charles St., Pittsburgh, PA 15214

Come join a free roundtable discussion about Josh Gibson, Negro League Baseball, and **The Summer King**, led by Sean Gibson, Executive Director of the Josh Gibson Foundation, and Pittsburgh Opera representatives. Sean Gibson speaks on Negro League Baseball on a national basis, and brings a depth of personal and historical knowledge to any discussion on this topic. Pittsburgh Opera representatives will discuss the opera and sing sneak previews of Sam Bankhead's and Wendell Smith's arias. [Alfred Walker](#), who will sing the role of Josh in the opera, will talk about the role and why he is looking forward to it.

Space is limited. RSVP at pittsburghopera.org/PghProject or call DeOndra Parker at 412-321-1678, ext. 536.

Free Community Event at Steel Valley High School

February 23 @ 7:00 PM

Steel Valley High School, 3113 Main Street, Munhall, PA 15120

Come join a free roundtable discussion about Josh Gibson, Negro League Baseball, the history of baseball in Homestead, and **The Summer King**. The event is sponsored by the Steel Valley High School History Club, whose members will serve as moderators. Sean Gibson, Executive Director of the Josh Gibson Foundation, will speak about Josh Gibson and the Negro Leagues. [The Battle of Homestead Foundation](#) will discuss the history of Homestead steel mill baseball teams and their role in providing talent to the Homestead Grays. Pittsburgh Opera representatives will discuss the opera and sing sneak previews of Sam Bankhead's and Wendell Smith's arias. [Alfred Walker](#), who will sing the role of Josh in the opera, will talk about the role and why he is looking forward to it. No reservations needed.

Free Community Event at Hill House Kaufman Center

February 27 @ 7:00 PM

Hill House Kaufman Center, 1825 Centre Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Come join a free roundtable discussion about Josh Gibson, Negro League Baseball, and **The Summer King**, led by Sean Gibson, Executive Director of the Josh Gibson Foundation, and Pittsburgh Opera representatives. Sean Gibson speaks on Negro League Baseball on a national basis, and brings a depth of personal and historical knowledge to any discussion on this topic. Pittsburgh Opera representatives will discuss the opera, and sing sneak previews of Grace's and Wendell Smith's arias.

Space is limited— RSVP at pittsburghopera.org/hillhouse or call 412-392-6479.

April Brown Bag concert

Saturday, April 1st from noon - 1:00PM

George R. White Opera Studio, Pittsburgh Opera Headquarters, [2425 Liberty Avenue](#)

You're invited to Pittsburgh Opera's free April Brown Bag concert. The program includes some of our [2016-17 Resident Artists](#)' favorite selections. It's free and open to everyone. Bring a friend and bring a lunch! Meet the Resident Artists afterward in an informal reception.

Doors open at 11:30AM. Handicapped parking is available by reservation. For more information: 412-281-0912 or <http://www.pittsburghopera.org/calendar/detail/april-brown-bag-concert1>.

Opera Up Close: The Summer King
Sunday, April 9th from 2:00 PM - 3:30 PM

Founder's Roo., Pittsburgh Opera Headquarters, [2425 Liberty Avenue](#)

Opera Up Close is an in-depth look at the music and story of Daniel Sonenberg's [The Summer King](#) with singers and directors from the production. Admission is \$5; the event is free to members of [FRIENDS of Pittsburgh Opera](#) and donors at \$50+. Handicapped parking is available by reservation. For more information: 412-281-0912 or <http://www.pittsburghopera.org/calendar/detail/opera-up-close-the-summer-king>.

Free Community Event at Mt. Lebanon Library

Wednesday, April 19, 7:00 - 8:30 PM

Mt. Lebanon Library, 16 Castle Shannon Blvd, Pittsburgh, PA 15228

Get an inside look at how **The Summer King** was conceived, created, and brought to Pittsburgh. Composer Daniel Sonenberg will talk about the process of creating an opera. Pittsburgh Opera representatives will discuss aspects of producing and bringing an opera to life. Additional details available soon.

The Summer King previews on WQED-FM 89.3 and WQED.ORG

Saturday, April 22nd, 2017 from 12:30 PM - 1:00 PM and

Friday, April 28th, 2017 from 7:00 PM - 7:30 PM

Make time for this half-hour preview of the world premiere of Pittsburgh Opera's [The Summer King](#) with candid commentary from singers and directors. Listen at 89.3 on your FM dial or at WQED.org. For more information: <http://www.pittsburghopera.org/calendar/detail/wqed-preview-the-summer-king>.

Free Community Event at Carnegie Library of Homestead

Sunday, April 23rd, 2017

Carnegie Library of Homestead, 510 E 10th Ave, Munhall, PA 15120

Come join a free roundtable discussion about Josh Gibson, Negro League Baseball, and **The Summer King**, led by Sean Gibson, Executive Director of the Josh Gibson Foundation, and Pittsburgh Opera representatives. Sean Gibson speaks on Negro League Baseball on a national basis, and brings a depth of personal and historical knowledge to any discussion on this topic. Pittsburgh Opera representatives will discuss the opera and perform musical excerpts. Composer Daniel Sonenberg will talk about the process of creating an opera.

[FRIENDS of Pittsburgh Opera](#) is generously sponsoring a reception afterwards for all attendees.

Audio Commentary: The Summer King
Tuesday, May 2nd, 2017, 7:00 PM
Benedum Center

Ticketholders with visual impairments are invited to use Pittsburgh Opera's Audio Description service at our Tuesday performance of [The Summer King](#). Trained volunteers describe the scenery, costumes, and stage action. The listeners hear these descriptions via assistive listening devices. Those wishing to use Audio Description should reserve seats to the Tuesday, May 2nd performance by contacting Regina Connolly at 412-281-0912, ext. 213 or groups@pittsburghopera.org. Braille and large-print programs are also available at all performances.

Meet the Artists of The Summer King
Tuesday, May 2nd, 2017 immediately following the opera
Benedum Center Lower Lobby

Ticketholders for the Tuesday, May 2nd performance of **The Summer King** are invited to head to the Lower Lobby of the Benedum following the performance for interviews with [General Director Christopher Hahn](#) and the stars of the opera. This event is free to all Tuesday performance ticketholders.

Pittsburgh Opera celebrates its 78th season in 2016-17. Established by five intrepid women in 1939, Pittsburgh Opera is viewed as one of the most vibrant opera organizations in the U.S., with a rich artistic tradition, outstanding educational programs, an acclaimed artist training program, and a progressive outlook toward the future. Its green initiative culminated in LEED® Silver certification for its Strip District headquarters, and its capacity as a true community partner has increased significantly under General Director Christopher Hahn's leadership.

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