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Pittsburgh Opera celebrates Mary Cardwell Dawson and Black Opera in Pittsburgh

[Pittsburgh Opera](#)'s final production of their 2023-24 season celebrates the courage and persistence of one of Pittsburgh's greatest citizens.

[*The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*](#) is inspired by the true story of the founder of the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC), which was the first Black opera company in the United States. Mary Cardwell Dawson, a victim of that era's segregationist policies, founded the company in Pittsburgh in 1941.

The NNOC, which performed nationally before disbanding in 1962 after Dawson's death, was headquartered in the historic [National Opera House](#) (NOH) on Apple Street in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Homewood. The NOH, owned by Pittsburgh Opera Board Member Jonnet Solomon, is currently undergoing a multi-million dollar restoration to return it to its former glory.

The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson, a 70-minute 'play with music', has four performances at the Byham Theater in downtown Pittsburgh April 27-May 5.

Leading the cast will be [Alyson Cambridge](#), making her Pittsburgh Opera debut bringing the role of Mary Cardwell Dawson to life, after her highly praised performances in the role at The Glimmerglass Festival. [Christian Mark Gibbs](#) and [Meroë Khalia Adeeb](#) also make their Pittsburgh Opera debuts, as Frank and Isabelle, respectively. Second year Pittsburgh Opera Resident Artist [Jazmine Olwalia](#) sings the role of Phoebe.

In addition, Pittsburgh Opera and the National Opera House are having a series of community events throughout late March and April intended to honor the rich history of Black opera in Pittsburgh, as well as showcase how that legacy lives on today.

Details on *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*, and the related community events, can be found below.

[*The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*](#)

Play by [Sandra Seaton](#)

Original music by [Carlos Simon](#)

Additional Music from *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
Text for original music by Sandra Seaton
Spoken and sung in English with supertitles projected above the stage

Where: Byham Theater, downtown Pittsburgh

When:

- Saturday, April 27 * 8:00 PM
- Tuesday, April 30 * 7:00 PM
- Friday, May 3 * 7:30 PM
- Sunday, May 5 * 3:00 PM

Synopsis:

Pittsburgh's unsung heroine who taught America to sing

In 1943, the National Negro Opera Company is set to perform on a floating barge to evade racially-segregated venues. But when bad weather threatens—pushing the performance to a segregated performance hall—visionary impressaria Mary Cardwell Dawson must find a way forward.

Mary Cardwell Dawson's dream to provide access for African Americans to perform on stages for all audiences changed the future of opera. Having founded the longest-running, all-Black opera company here in Pittsburgh and organizing opera guilds in the country's biggest cities, Mary Cardwell Dawson would go on to train hundreds of African American youth to sing.

Written by Mark Twain Award-winning playwright and librettist [Sandra Seaton](#), *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson* celebrates the remarkable founder of Pittsburgh's historic and groundbreaking National Negro Opera Company. This play with music includes selections from *Carmen* as well as original music by award-winning Kennedy Center Composer-in-Residence [Carlos Simon](#).

Cast and Artistic Team

Mary Cardwell Dawson
Frank
Phoebe
Isabelle

Alyson Cambridge⁺
Christian Mark Gibbs⁺
Jazmine Olwalia*
Meroë Khalia Adeeb⁺

Music Director/Pianist
Stage Director:
Set Designer:
Costume Designer:

Marvin Mills⁺
Kimille Howard⁺
James F. Rotondo III⁺
Jessica Jahn

Wig and Make-up Designer:	Izear Winfrey
Lighting Designer:	Todd Nonn
Stage Manager	Cindy Knight
Head of Music	Glenn Lewis
Director of Musical Studies	Mark Trawka
Associate Coach/Pianist	James Lesniak
Assistant Stage Director	Claire Young
Assistant Stage Manager	Bee Anderson

+ Pittsburgh Opera debut

* Pittsburgh Opera Resident Artist

Scenery and costumes originally created for The Glimmerglass Festival;
Commissioned by The Glimmerglass Festival; commission and production
sponsored by Robert L. Turner.

Tickets

- Available online at opera.culturaldistrict.org, by phone at 412-456-6666, or in-person at the [Theater Square Box Office](#), 655 Penn Ave downtown.
- Tickets start at \$15.
- Tickets for children and teens ages 6–18 are half-price.
- [Group discounts](#), [student discounts](#), and [other discounts](#) are available.

Community Events

[Family Day](#)

Tuesday, March 26th, 5:30 PM

University of Pittsburgh Homewood Community Engagement Center
622 N Homewood Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15208

In partnership with [Homewood Children's Village](#), this Family Day will consist of different free activities designed to expose children, teens, and their families to some of the many different components that make up opera. [Register here](#).

[Opera Meets Jazz](#)

Friday, April 5th, 7:00 PM

St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church
444 Lincoln Ave, East Liberty, PA 15206

Join us for a free event where our Resident Artists and Jazz Luminaries from the [Afro-American Music Institute](#) present a special concert showcasing the intersection of Jazz and Opera. Come explore the similarities and differences we find in Jazz

and Opera as we enjoy music from the time of Mary Cardwell Dawson's life and some of her favorite arias. [Register here](#).

['Honoring Our Past, Connecting To Our Present' Storytelling](#)

Thursday, April 11th, 7:00 PM
Bitz Opera Factory
2425 Liberty Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Telling the stories of those who knew Mary Cardwell Dawson, had a connection to the Homewood neighborhood, or had experience with the National Negro Opera Company home is at the center of this free event. We incorporate four stories within a live interview with Jonnet Solomon, Executive Director of the [National Opera House](#), to weave together the past and present in this enlightening and fascinating event. [Register here](#).

[Sharing Experiences of Black Creatives](#)

Sunday, April 14th, 2:00 PM
Bitz Opera Factory
2425 Liberty Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Join us for a free panel discussion about the themes and resonances surrounding [The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson](#). Special guests **Thomas Douglas** ([Bach Choir of Pittsburgh/CMU](#)), **Shaunda McDill** ([Pittsburgh Public Theater](#)), **Joanna Obuzor** ([Pittsburgh Cultural Trust](#)), **Izeah Winfrey** ([Studio Booth](#)), **Claudia Brownlee** ([Pittsburgh Opera](#)) and **Carlton Ford** ([Taproot Foundation](#)) will share their insights into this work as well as their own stories of their successes and struggles while working in the arts. [Register here](#).

[A Legacy Realized: A Conversation and Music with Denyce Graves on Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson](#)

Tuesday, April 16th
Concert at 6:00 PM
Bitz Opera Factory
2425 Liberty Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Musical legend Denyce Graves, who had originally intended to be part of the performances, will instead be hosting this intimate, personal event celebrating Mary Cardwell Dawson's legacy. She will talk about Mary's place in history, how Mary has inspired her and countless others, and the importance of keeping Mary's memory alive. Ms. Graves will also sing selections with connections to the National Negro Opera Company and its era.

Limited seating is available for a dinner with the artists following the concert at Balvanera Cocina Argentina. Buy tickets at pittsburghopera.org/denyce or call (412) 281-0912 ext. 225.

Pittsburgh Opera Sponsors

Pittsburgh Opera's season is made possible, onstage and off, by support from all corners of the community.

- [PNC](#) is Pittsburgh Opera's 2023–24 Season Sponsor.
- [WQED-FM](#) is Pittsburgh Opera's Media Sponsor.
- [Ambridge Regional Distribution and Manufacturing Center](#) is the Tuesday performance and ['Meet the Artists'](#) post-show event sponsor.
- Pittsburgh Opera programs are generously supported by [Allegheny Regional Asset District](#) and the [Pennsylvania Council on the Arts](#).

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