

People & Places

Stage

Loved by critics, audiences

Speedo ready for operatic stardom

By Mike Silverman

He opened the season as kindly Uncle Paul in the Metropolitan Opera premiere of Terence Blanchard's "Fire Shut Up in My Bones." Next night he was the vagabond monk Varlaam, stopping the show in Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov."

Now he's back as the fisherman Jake in the Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" — and for good measure making three appearances as the philosopher Colline in Puccini's "La Boheme."

It's been quite a season for **Ryan Speedo Green**, whose resounding bass-baritone voice and charismatic stage presence unfailingly impress critics and audiences, even in the supporting roles he's so far been assigned.

Typical is the appraisal by Zachary Woolfe in The New York Times: "Ryan Speedo Green, the best singer in 'Fire Shut Up in My Bones,' has equally rich, unforced power as the drunken monk Varlaam."



Green

Now, after a decade of apprenticeship, Green is entering a new phase of an improbable career that has already taken him from poverty, violence and juvenile detention to a place at America's leading opera house.

"I feel that I'm on the brink of something bigger," Green said in an interview after a rehearsal for "Porgy." "It's an amazing feeling to see it bear fruit in this way, after all the work I put in, to be recognized by people in this business who hire and fire."

One of those people is Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager.

"To see Speedo blossom from a trainee in our young singers program into a major artist on our stage has been thrilling," Gelb told The Associated Press. "Met audiences will be hearing him in many starring roles in the seasons to come."

Green (everyone in the opera world calls him Speedo, a middle name bestowed by his father after his favorite swimsuit) came into the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program back in 2011 as anything but a finished product.

Presence

"I struggled a lot," he said, "I never had a problem with volume or stage presence, but I needed to be honed, learn where to point my voice, what roles to sing, knowing the languages."

Ken Noda, musical adviser to the Lindemann program, recalls when he first heard Green.

"The voice was a volcano. It had incredible fire and personality, and it was inseparable from who he was and his life," he said. "He had not the most sophisticated training. It was a tall order, because he was like a race horse who was already on a winning streak, but he had so much remedial work to do."

"He not only survived it, he just devoured it," Noda said. "The appetite was just off the charts. Within a year and a half he had made so much progress it was like 200%. I'd never seen anything like that."

Green did so well that the Vienna State Opera offered him a coveted slot in its ensemble. He spent four seasons there, singing by his count "42 roles and over 250 performances" — including one stretch where he took on six different parts in three weeks, something not even the Met would ask him to do.

"If you can survive four years of that gauntlet, you can survive anything," he said.

During his time in Vienna, he took such a liking to the city that he now lives there with his wife Irene and two young children when he's not performing elsewhere.

Given his talent, some might wonder why it's taken him to age 35 to make the leap from featured player to star. It has much to do with his type of voice, which as Green said is only now "pretty set in stone."

"People don't always realize these deep male voices with stature and vocal weight take longer to ferment and blossom later," said Francesca Zambello, artistic director of the Washington National Opera who has followed Green's career closely. "That's why they can often keep singing into their 60s."

Zambello has cast him as the toreador Escamillo in WNO's production of Bizet's "Carmen" set for this spring. It's a part especially suited to a singer like Green who can easily handle the higher notes of a baritone's range while also comfortably descending deep into bass territory.

Recognized

"Carmen" is a work dear to his heart, since, as recounted in Daniel Bergner's 2016 book "Sing for Your Life," Green first aspired to a career in opera when as a teenager he was taken to hear mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves in the title role at the Met and realized that Black people could be opera singers.

A series of mentors and coaches recognized his potential and nurtured him to the point where in 2011 he was a winner of the Met's national competition for young singers. The invitation to the Lindemann program followed.

Once at the Met, the hard work of transforming raw talent into polished performance held no terrors for him.

"My life I lived before I became an opera singer was in a way so much tougher that no problem I could have on the stage could ever match that," Green said. "So when I'm on stage and I'm allowed to tell a story, it's therapeutic to me."

Besides Escamillo, his schedule this season includes a concert performance with the Los Angeles Philharmonic as Rocco in Beethoven's "Fidelio" and one more supporting stint: a return to the Met as Trufaldino, part of a commedia dell'arte troupe in Richard Strauss's "Ariadne auf Naxos."

Ask him to name roles he's currently studying and he rattles off a dizzying list: Mephistopheles in Gounod's "Faust," Figaro in Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," Procida in Verdi's "The Sicilian Vespers," Orest in Strauss's "Elektra," and some Wagner: Kurwenal in "Tristan und Isolde" and Gunther in "Götterdämmerung."

"There are others where I'm waiting five to 10 years," Green said. "I want my career to be a slow burn, not an explosion that peters out."

Whatever the future holds, Green's ability to overcome his troubled past gives him a unique perspective on his current success and the opportunities before him.

"When I was younger, the first thing in my mind other than not to go back to jail was to be an opera singer," he said. "To be able to achieve something like that, I know it's a one-in-a-million opportunity, and I don't take it for granted." (AP)



This image released by The Metropolitan Opera shows bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green as Varlaam, (center), with Tichina Vaughn as the Hostess of the Inn, (left), and Brenton Ryan as Missail in a scene from Mussorgsky's 'Boris Godunov' in rehearsal last September in New York. (AP)



Fashion designer Virgil Abloh gives a thumbs up after the presentation of Off-White Men's Spring-Summer 2019 collection presented in Paris, Wednesday June 20, 2018. Abloh, a leading fashion executive hailed as the Karl Lagerfeld of his generation, has died after a private battle with cancer. He was 41. (AP)



Smollett



McConaughey

Variety

AUSTIN, Texas: Actor **Matthew McConaughey** isn't running for Texas governor after months of publicly flirting with the idea of becoming the latest celebrity candidate.

The Academy Award winner said in a video posted Sunday night that political leadership was not a route he was choosing to take "at this moment," McConaughey, 52, said he would instead focus on supporting businesses and foundations that create pathways for others to succeed.

The Texas governor's race is already shaping up to be one of the nation's highest-profile contests in 2022. Republican Gov. **Greg Abbott** is seeking a third term and Democrat **Beto O'Rourke**, coming off failed bids for the US Senate and president, announced month that he was getting in the race.

The "Dazed and Confused" and "Dallas Buyers Club" star had never said what party — if any — he would run under while acknowledging that he was mulling a run for governor in his home state. McConaughey had also shied away from going into policy specifics and positions on contentious issues in Texas.

"Politicians? The good ones can help us to get to where we need to go, yeah," McConaughey said in the video posted to Twitter. "But let's be clear, they can't do anything for us unless we choose to do for ourselves."

In California, former Olympian **Caitlyn Jenner** ran for governor this year in a failed GOP-led recall effort against Democratic Gov. **Gavin Newsom** but gained little momentum. (AP)

CHICAGO: Two brothers stand at the center of the case that prosecutors will lay before jurors when the trial of **Jussie Smollett** begins this week.

The former "Empire" actor contends he was the victim of a racist and homophobic assault in downtown Chicago on a frigid night in January 2019. The siblings, who worked with him on the TV show, say he paid them \$3,500 to pose as his attackers.

Smollett is accused of lying to police about the alleged attack and has been charged with felony disorderly conduct. A class 4 felony, the crime carries a sentence of up to three years in prison but experts have said it is more likely that if Smollett is convicted he would be placed on probation

Obituary

'A man with beautiful soul and great wisdom'

Fashion designer Abloh dies at 41

NEW YORK, Nov. 29, (AP) — Virgil Abloh, a leading designer whose groundbreaking fusions of streetwear and high couture made him one of the most celebrated tastemakers in fashion and beyond, has died of cancer. He was 41.

Abloh's death was announced Sunday by the luxury group LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) and Abloh's own Off-White label, which he founded in 2013. Abloh was the artistic director for Louis Vuitton's menswear, but his ubiquitous, consumer-friendly presence in culture was wide-ranging and dynamic. Some compared him to Jeff Koons. Others hailed him as his generation's Karl Lagerfeld.

"We are all shocked after this terrible news. Virgil was not only a genius designer, a visionary, he was also a man with a beautiful soul and great wisdom," Bernard Arnault, chairman and chief executive of LVMH, said in a statement.

A statement from Abloh's family on the designer's Instagram account said Abloh was diagnosed two years ago with cardiac angiosarcoma, a rare form of cancer in which a tumor occurs in the heart.

"He chose to endure his battle privately since his diagnosis in 2019, undergoing numerous challenging treatments, all while helming several significant institutions that span fashion, art, and culture," the statement read.

In 2018, Abloh became the first Black artistic director of men's wear at Louis Vuitton in the French design house's storied history. A first-generation Ghanaian American whose seamstress mother taught him to sew, Abloh had no formal fashion training but had

design could be created by changing an original by 3%. Critics said Abloh was more brilliant at repackaging than creating something new. But Abloh's style was also self-aware — quotation marks were a trademark label for him — and high-minded.

"Streetwear in my mind is linked to Duchamp," Abloh told the New Yorker in 2019. "It's this idea of the readymade. I'm talking Lower East Side, New York. It's like hip-hop. It's sampling. I take James Brown, I chop it up, I make a new song."

Stars lined up to be dressed by Abloh. Beyoncé, Michael B. Jordan, Kim Kardashian West, Timothée Chalamet and Serena Williams have worn his clothes. LVMH acquired a majority stake in earlier this year, made him an arbiter of cool. But his appointment at Louis Vuitton brought Abloh to the apex of an industry he was once a scrappy outsider in — and made Abloh one of the most powerful Black executives in a historically closed fashion world.

As Abloh prepared for his debut menswear show in 2018, he told GQ, "I now have a platform to change the industry."

"We're designers, so we can start a trend, we can highlight issues, we can make a lot of people focus on something or we can cause a lot of people to focus on ourselves," Abloh said. "I'm not interested in (the latter). I'm interested in using my platform as one of a very small group of African-American males to design a house, to sort of show people in a poetic way."

Abloh is survived by his wife Shannon Abloh and his children, Lowe and Grey.

Collaborations

Abloh's work with West served as a blueprint for future border-crossing collaborations that married high and low. With Nike, he partnered his Off-White label for a line of frenzy-inducing sneakers remixed with a variety of styles and Helvetica fonts. Abloh also designed furniture for IKEA, refillable bottles for Evian and Big Mac cartons for McDonald's. His work was exhibited at the Louvre, the Gagosian and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Abloh's death stunned the entertainment world. Actor Riz Ahmed said on Twitter that Abloh "stretched culture and changed the game." Fashion designer Jeff Staple wrote, "You taught us all how to dream." Pharrell Williams called Abloh "a kind, generous, thoughtful creative genius."

Abloh took what he called a "3% approach" to fashion — that a new

and perhaps ordered to perform community service.

Whether Smollett testifies remains an open question. But the siblings, **Abimbola** and **Olabinjo Osundairo**, will take the witness stand where they are expected to repeat what they have told police officers and prosecutors — that they carried out the attack at Smollett's behest.

Jurors also may see surveillance video from more than four dozen cameras that police reviewed to trace the brothers' movements before and after the reported attack, as well as a video showing the brothers purchasing a red hat, ski masks and gloves from a beauty supply shop

hours earlier.

Smollett's attorneys have not spelled out how they will confront that evidence and the lead attorney, **Nenye Uche**, declined to comment. But there are clues as to how they might during the trial, which starts with jury selection Monday in a Chicago courtroom. It is expected to last a week.

Buried in nearly 500 pages of Chicago Police Department reports is a statement from a woman who lived in the area who says she saw a white man with "reddish brown hair" who appeared to be waiting for someone that night.

She told a detective that when the man turned away from her, she "could see hang-

ing out from underneath his jacket what appeared to be a rope."

Her comments could back up Smollett's contention that his attackers draped a makeshift noose around his neck. Further, if she testified that the man was white, it would support Smollett's statements — widely ridiculed because the brothers, who come from Nigeria, are Black — that he saw pale or white skin around the eyes of one of his masked attackers.

One of the defense attorneys, **Tina Glandian**, suggested during a March 2019 appearance on NBC's "Today" show, that one of the brothers could have used white makeup around his eyes to make Smollett believe he was white. To address skepticism on the program that she said talked about the Joker character from a movie.

Given there is so much evidence, including the brothers' own statements, that they participated in the attack, it is not likely that Smollett's attorneys will try to prove they did not take part. That could perhaps lead the defense to contend that Smollett was the victim of a very real attack at the hands of the brothers, perhaps with the help of others, who now are only implicating the actor so prosecutors won't charge them, too.

Their \$3,500 check could be key. While the brothers say that was their fee to carry out the fake attack, Smollett has offered a different and much more innocent explanation: that he wrote the check to pay one of them to work as his personal trainer.

"I would assume the defense is going to zero in on that," said **Joe Lopez**, a prominent defense attorney not involved with the case. "If they defend messages regarding training sessions, checks he (Smollett) wrote them for training, photographs, the defense would use all of that." (AP)



Taiwanese actress Caitlin Fang arrives at the 58th Golden Horse Awards in Taipei, Taiwan, Saturday, Nov. 27. Fang is nominated for Best New Performer for the film 'American Girl' at this year's Golden Horse Awards, one of the Chinese-language film industry's biggest annual events. (AP)