

BREAKING BARRIERS WITH HER BEAUTIFUL VOICE

Acclaimed South African Soprano To Make Kansas City Debut

By Patrick Neas

Photography by Dario Acosta

It's a long way from Piet Retief, South Africa to the opera stages of Milan, Paris and New York, but through extraordinary talent, pluck and determination, soprano Pretty Yende has made the journey.

The Harriman-Jewell Series will present Yende, one of the most acclaimed voices of her generation, in her Kansas City debut Jan. 7, 2023, at the Folly Theater.

“She’s amazing,” said Clark Morris, executive and artistic director of the Harriman-Jewell Series. “I think her voice is incredibly beautiful, and she has amazing agility and a real musical sensibility. It feels like we haven’t had much access to her in the United States, so I’m really excited to bring her to Kansas City.”

When she was 16, Yende was introduced to opera when she heard the “Flower Duet” from “Lakmé” in a TV commercial for British Airways. After attending the South African College of Music, from which she graduated “cum laude,” she attended Accademia Teatro all Scala in Milan.

After she completed her formal schooling, Yende’s career took off like the proverbial rocket. She’s won many prizes and awards, including two prizes in the 2008 International Vocal Competition ’s-Hertogenbosch, first prize in opera and operetta at the International Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition, first prize at the Vincenzo Bellini International Competition and first prize at the 2011 Operalia, the vocal competition founded by Plácido Domingo.

Only 37, Yende has already had a remarkable career. She has sung a wide variety of leading roles with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Opéra National de Paris, Metropolitan Opera, La Scala and the Vienna State Opera, where she starred in what has become her signature role, Violetta in Verdi’s “La Traviata.”



And critics can't get enough of her. France24 calls Yende "one of the most sought-after sopranos on the planet." The Sunday Times says Yende is a "force to be reckoned with" and The Washington Post declares that Yende has "a voice that can reach to the stars."

Morris says he expects Yende's recital to reflect the many roles and composers she has sung.

"She has a lot of interests, so I would expect a highly varied program," Morris said. "It's one of the things that we encourage singers to do. When we get a chance to have somebody so special as Pretty Yende, we love to hear all of the aspects of her voice and maybe introduce us to some music that we're not familiar with and see where her musical mind is."

Yende is the latest in a long line of distinguished opera singers of color who have appeared on the Harriman-Jewell Series, including Leontyne Price and Jessie Norman. In the pivotal civil rights year of 1968, Marian Anderson, the American soprano who opened so many doors for Black singers, gave a talk on the Harriman-Jewell Series.

"We don't have a video of that speech, but I'd love to go back and hear it," Morris said. "Richard Harriman, the founder of the Harriman-Jewell Series, certainly believed in equality, and he lived it out. We're fortunate to have that legacy."

Although the Harriman-Jewell Series is committed to diversity, Morris says the Series also places a great value on excellence.

"What we're trying to do first and foremost is to bring the very best of the very best in the world," he said. "Pretty Yende happens



to be breaking barriers because she's a person of color and she is from South Africa, so that makes her story interesting, and it gives us joy that we get to be a part of her story. But she's also one of the very finest talents to come on the opera stage in a long time. That's what we're most excited about."

Pretty Yende, soprano. 7 p.m. Jan. 7, 2023. Folly Theater, 300 W. 12th St.

Go to www.hjseries.org for event tickets and details.

