

Washington National Opera Artistic Director Francesca Zambello Inducted into OPERA America's Opera Hall of Fame

*Former WNO Board President Jeffrey Cunard received
National Opera Trustee Recognition Award for his work shaping WNO's affiliation
agreement with The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts*

WASHINGTON, D.C. (March 24, 2026)—Washington National Opera Artistic Director **Francesca Zambello** was inducted into the OPERA America Opera Hall of Fame at the OPERA America Salutes Awards Dinner on Friday, March 20, 2026, at The Plaza Hotel. Former WNO Board of Trustees President **Jeffrey Cunard** received the National Opera Trustee Recognition Award. WNO General Director **Timothy O'Leary**, a former OPERA America board chair, delivered remarks honoring longtime OPERA America President **Marc A. Scorca** on his retirement and induction into the Hall of Fame.

An internationally renowned director and arts leader, **Francesca Zambello** has served as artistic director of Washington National Opera since 2013. During her tenure, she has shaped the company's artistic vision through ambitious productions, including the company's first complete *Ring* cycle, and by founding the American Opera Initiative, a groundbreaking commissioning program that has expanded the canon of new American opera. Zambello served as artistic and general director of the Glimmerglass Festival from 2011 to 2022, where she strengthened the company's national profile, expanded its resident artist program, and introduced innovative community engagement initiatives. Her distinguished international directing career spans more than 50 opera houses worldwide, including the Metropolitan Opera, La Scala, and the Paris Opera.

"I am deeply grateful for this honor and for the extraordinary artists, collaborators, and audiences who have shaped my journey," shares Zambello. "Opera has always been, at its heart, a living, breathing art form—one that reflects who we are and who we aspire to be. At a time when connection, empathy, and shared experience are more essential than ever, the work of creating great art is not finished—it is more urgent. We must continue to tell bold stories, nurture new voices, and ensure that opera remains a vital force in our cultural life."

The awards were presented in an annual ceremony, "OPERA America Salutes," on Friday, March 20, 2026 at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. More than 500 leaders from around the world assembled for what is largely considered opera's premier awards event. WNO Board President **Andy Pharoah** remarked, "It was such a pleasure to spend an evening among the world's greatest opera visionaries and leaders. I was so proud to witness how enthusiastically and warmly WNO was embraced following the many challenges that have come our way this past year. Our company received no less than three extended standing ovations. It felt like we were at the 'Academy Awards' for opera—and WNO won best picture, best actor and best director!"

At the induction ceremony, Matthew Shilvock, general director of San Francisco Opera, honored Zambello with the following remarks:

“Francesca Zambello is one of the most distinguished general directors and stage directors in the country... no, the world!

“Francesca’s career as a stage director began as an assistant to the legendary Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. Her American debut took place at Houston Grand Opera with a production of *Fidelio* in 1984. From 1984 until 1991, she was the artistic director of the Skylight Music Theater with Stephen Wadsworth.

"Her European debut took place at La Fenice in Venice in 1987. Her directing career spans more than 50 opera houses, including the Metropolitan Opera, La Scala, the Paris Opera, the Bolshoi, Munich State Opera, Covent Garden, and Opera Australia. In recognition of her contributions to international culture, she has been named a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government and a Knight of the Order of the Star of Italy, and she has received top honors and awards in Russia, Germany, Australia, and England.

“As a general director, Francesca transformed The Glimmerglass Festival, enriching each season with outstanding productions, exciting commissions, recitals, lectures, and community engagement initiatives. Noteworthy among them were performances for the incarcerated at Attica Correction Facility. She led the company from 2011 to 2022, including through the years of the pandemic when she created an ingenious outdoor performance space. She also established the Glimmerglass Youth Chorus, commissioning four operas for young performers that have been produced at opera companies across the U.S.

“Since 2013, she has served as artistic director of Washington National Opera, where she has emphasized artistic citizenship – championing programming that invites dialogue about our nation’s past, present and future. She founded the American Opera Initiative to commission and develop new American works. She directed the company’s first complete *Ring* cycle. Most recently, with General Director Timothy O’Leary, she moved the company from the John F. Kennedy Center to multiple venues across the Washington, D.C. metro area.

“A hallmark of Francesca's leadership is collaborating with outstanding artists and promoting emerging talent, while championing women and diversity among her collaborators. Several generations of this field's most extraordinary singers, directors, designers, composers, librettists, and leaders owe their careers to opportunities ‘Cesca provided.

“Francesca has already been recognized in France, Italy, Russia, Germany, Australia, and England for her remarkable career. Tonight, we are delighted to induct her into our Opera Hall of Fame.”

Zambello’s induction places her among a distinguished group of artists, administrators, and advocates whose work has shaped the future of opera in North America. For more information about the Opera Hall of Fame or Zambello’s fellow inductees, please see OPERA America’s [press release](#).

OPERA America also recognized the leadership of **Jeffrey Cunard**, awarding him the National Opera Trustee Recognition Award. Cunard’s distinguished legal career has been matched by an enduring commitment to the company. A partner at Debevoise & Plimpton for more than three decades, Cunard joined the WNO Board of Trustees in 2014 and served as board president from 2018 to 2024. During his tenure, he strengthened the organization’s financial foundation. Of note, Cunard led a multi-year process to develop a new operating agreement with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts that covered more than 80 pages of operational detail that anticipated every contingency, widely credited as a model of fiduciary prudence and strategic acumen. Establishing it with the Kennedy Center in early 2024 required countless hours of volunteer work from Cunard, resulting in a highly precise agreement that strengthened WNO’s finances and self-reliance. Notably, the agreement laid the groundwork and created safeguards now critical to WNO’s success in its transition. For additional information about the National Opera Trustee Recognition Award or Cunard’s fellow recipients, please see OPERA America’s [press release](#).

Former OPERA America board chair and WNO General Director **Timothy O’Leary** also had a significant role in the ceremony. O’Leary provided remarks about OPERA America outgoing president **Marc A. Scorca**, who—in a surprise announcement—was also inducted into the Hall of Fame.

ABOUT WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

(WNO) is one of the world’s leading opera companies. Led by General Director Timothy O’Leary, Artistic Director Francesca Zambello, and Music Director Robert Spano, WNO presents a wide-ranging repertory spanning beloved classics, contemporary works, and newly commissioned operas, collaborating with many of opera’s greatest luminaries, including Christine Goerke, Denyce Graves, Renée Fleming, J’Nai Bridges, and Ryan McKinny. Founded in 1956, WNO celebrates its 70th anniversary in 2026, a year that also marks its return to operating as a fully independent company. Recent seasons have featured acclaimed productions of *Aida*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and a landmark *Turandot* with a newly commissioned ending by Christopher Tin and Susan Soon He Stanton. WNO’s legacy includes Zambello’s internationally celebrated Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* cycle, the D.C. premiere of Jenine Tesori’s *Blue* and *Grounded*—a WNO co-commission—and the world premiere of Philip Glass’ *Appomattox*.

WNO is also internationally recognized for its education and community engagement initiatives, including the American Opera Initiative, the Cafritz Young Artist Program, the WNO Opera Institute, and Opera in the Outfield, which advance its mission to make opera vital, accessible, and artistically ambitious in the nation’s capital. Beyond the main stage, WNO artists bring opera into the community through initiatives such as workshops with incarcerated youth at the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center, educational programs at the Library of Congress exploring themes from the season’s repertory, and performances and musical events in venues throughout the Washington region.

MEDIA CONTACT:

press@washnatopera.org

###