

PRESS RELEASE

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS AND COMMUNICATION

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**The Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation Brings Major Support
to the Opera *The Little Rock Nine*
by Tania León and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.**

CONWAY, Ark. — The Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation has awarded a grant of \$50,000 toward an opera to be created by composer Tania León and literary critic and scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The opera, *The Little Rock Nine*, will commemorate the 60th anniversary of events that transfixed the nation in September 1957, as nine African-American students entered the previously all-white Central High School under federal troop escort.

Little Rock and the Nine came to symbolize the federal government's commitment to eliminating separate systems of education for blacks and whites. The opera is being commissioned by the University of Central Arkansas's College of Fine Arts and Communication.

Gates writes: "At the center of the crisis were nine black children seeking the promise of equal education. Behind them was a federal court order. In their way, literally, was their state's white governor, determined to hold onto the old ways, even at the point of arms. As the country watched the standoff unfold, the children walked up the schoolhouse steps with bricks and bats bearing down. Their only hope: the President and a military, which, at his command, had helped liberate Europe after D-Day. In an America torn between its capacity for cruelty and dreams, what would win out: betrayal or courage, rage or principle, hate or the dignity of rising by learning? The answer would revolutionize a nation."

He continues: "It would be one of the honors of our lives to tell this story as it has never been told: as a modern opera as searing and inspiring as any of the dramas of the ancient world, but with more immediacy."

Based in Dayton, Ohio, the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation has recently been in the news for its funding of commissions for women composers administered by Opera America and the League of American Orchestras. *The Little Rock Nine* has also received support from the National Endowment for the Arts (\$15,000) and the Fred Darragh Foundation (\$25,000).

Tania León is highly regarded as a composer and conductor and recognized for her many accomplishments as an educator and advisor to arts organizations. She has received Fromm, Koussevitzky, and Guggenheim Fellowships for her composition. Her opera *Scourge of Hyacinths*, based on a radio play by Wole Soyinka, received more than 20 performances throughout Europe and in Mexico with staging and design by Robert Wilson (all conducted by the composer). The aria "*Oh Yemanjá*" ("Mother's Prayer") was recorded by Dawn Upshaw on her Nonesuch CD, "The World So Wide." In 2012 she received both a Grammy

nomination (for "Best Contemporary Classical Composition") and a Latin Grammy nomination (for "Best Classical Contemporary Composition").

A founding member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, León instituted the Brooklyn Philharmonic Community Concert Series, co-founded the *Sonidos de las Américas* festivals with the American Composers Orchestra and is the founder of *Composers Now* festival in New York City. She has lectured at Harvard University and at the Mosse Lecture Series at the University of Humboldt in Berlin, and was the Andrew Mellon Foundation's Distinguished Scholar at the Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg, South Africa. She was named Distinguished Professor of the City University of New York in 2006. In 2010, León was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University and one of the world's most prominent scholars on African-American history. His recent six-part PBS series *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* chronicles 500 years of African-American history. He was the host of the PBS programs *Wonders of the African World* (1999), *Black in Latin America* (2011), and *Finding Your Roots* (2012).

Gates is the head of the African-American studies department at Harvard University, where he directs the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research. A recipient of The MacArthur Fellowship, he was chosen by the National Endowment for the Humanities to give the 2002 Jefferson Lecture, and was named one of *TIME* magazine's "25 Most Influential Americans" in 2007. He is the recipient of more than 50 honorary degrees.

The NEA Art Works grant is the first in **University of Central Arkansas** history. UCA's award was one of 886 to non-profit organizations nationwide.

"These NEA-supported projects will not only have a positive impact on local economies but will also provide opportunities for people of all ages to participate in the arts, help our communities to become more vibrant and support our nation's artists as they contribute to our cultural landscape," NEA Acting Chairman Joan Shigekawa said.

The mission of the UCA College of Fine Arts and Communication includes presenting programming that educates, deepens and diversifies audiences.

"The college is committed to nurturing creativity and making great art accessible to a wide audience," said Dr. Gayle Seymour, associate dean of the UCA College of Fine Arts and Communication. "We are delighted our opera project, which tackles one of the most important Civil Rights events in US history and which happened right here in Arkansas, has been recognized by such a prestigious agency as the National Endowment for the Arts."

The brainchild of Dr. Rollin Potter, former dean of UCA's College of Fine Arts and Communication, *The Little Rock Nine* will tell the story of the nine African-American students who, under the protection of the United States Army's 101st Airborne Division, entered Little Rock's Central High School, risking their lives to ensure future generations' equal access to education.

Seymour and Dr. Donna Lampkin Stephens, UCA assistant professor of journalism, have worked with Potter for nearly two years on the project, which they hope will invite younger generations into the world of opera through the drama and innovation that León and Gates will bring to the work.

Set within the climate of fear that persisted in the South, the story contains classic opera heroes and villains, including the nine students and their families, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, civil rights pioneer Daisy L. Bates and Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus, who called out the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the Nine from entering the school.

Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Nine who dared to enter the all-white school, remembered Sept. 4, 1957, the day she withstood segregationist intimidation: “I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob — someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.”

For more information about *The Little Rock Nine*, contact Gayle Seymour at (501) 450-3295 or gayles@uca.edu.

The UCA College of Fine Arts and Communication includes the Departments of Art, Communication, Mass Communication and Theatre, Music and Writing. The college’s primary mission is the preparation of the next generation of artists, educators and communicators. For more information about CFAC, visit uca.edu/cfac or call (501) 450-3293.