CAL PERFORMANCES PRESENTS THE U. S. PREMIERE OF
**DESDEMONA** WRITTEN BY TONI MORRISON, MUSIC BY
ROKIA TRAORÉ AND DIRECTED BY PETER SELLARS
OCTOBER 26-29 AT ZELLERBACH PLAYHOUSE

A two part-symposium on the creation of Desdemona and the cultural forces in Shakespeare will be held October 27 & 28 featuring Toni Morrison (via Skype), Peter Sellars, Rokia Traoré and UC Berkeley scholars

**Sightlines: Pre-performance talks with director Peter Sellars, October 28 & 29, 7:00-7:30 p.m. in Zellebach Playhouse**

**BERKELEY, September 22, 2011**—The visionary director Peter Sellars brings the U.S. premiere of Desdemona, a collaboration with Nobel Prize-winning writer Toni Morrison and Malian singer/composer Rokia Traoré to Cal Performances’ Zellerbach Playhouse on Wednesday, October 26 – Saturday, October 29 at 8:00 p.m. Desdemona explores issues of gender, race, love and destiny as the title character and her African maid Barbary reach beyond the grave to give voice to the mysterious forces behind Othello.

In addition to Traoré, who performs the role of Barbary, the production includes an ensemble of West African musicians: three vocalists Fatim Kouyaté, Bintou Soumbounou and Kadiatou Sangaré and two instrumentalists Mamah Diabaté, n'goni (a stringed instrument) and Mamadyba Camara, kora (double bridge harp lute). The role of Desdemona will be played by Tina Benko, a New York-based actress whose recent credits include Ivo Van Hove’s production of The Little Foxes, and Wallace Shawn’s Marie and Bruce. Sellars longtime design team is headed up by master lighting designer James F. Ingalls. Desdemona is co-commissioned and co-produced by Cal Performances, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Wiener Festwochen, Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, spielzeit'europa of the Berliner Festspiele, Barbican, Arts Council London and London 2012 Festival.

In Act I of Shakespeare’s play, Othello says that he and Desdemona fell in love as he told her stories. “Toni Morrison said, ‘I want to write those stories,’” explains Sellars in a recent
interview in Berkeley. “She’s written the back stories, the fairytales, the tall tales, the tales of adventure and battle.” Traoré, one of the most important voices of contemporary Africa, has composed songs and music that illuminate the imagined conversations between Desdemona and Barbary. The collaboration between Morrison and Traoré was 21st century with Traoré writing songs in Mali and sending them to Morrison who, after listening to the music, wrote scenes.

A two-part symposium presented in association with the Doreen B. Townsend Center will be held on Thursday, October 27 from 5-6:30 p.m. and on Friday, October 28 from 12-3:00 p.m. at Zellerbach Playhouse. On the first day, director Peter Sellars will discuss giving voice to the unheard characters in Shakespeare’s Othello. The second day will be divided into three conversations: the first between writer Toni Morrison (via Skype), composer Rokia Traoré and Sellars; the second between UC Berkeley scholars Abdul JanMohamed (English Department), Tamara Roberts (Music Department) and Darieck Scott (African American Studies); and the final talk is titled Africa Speaks and it will be between Traoré and Sellars. These events are free and open to the public. For a complete schedule go to www.calperformances.org.

A Sightlines pre-performance talks will be given by Peter Sellars, Friday, October 28 and Saturday, October 29 at 7:00 p.m. in Zellerbach Playhouse. These events are open to all Desdemona ticket holders.

PETER SELLARS

American theater, opera and festival director Peter Sellars, has gained renown worldwide for his transformative interpretations of artistic masterpieces and collaborative projects with an extraordinary range of creative artists across three decades. Sellars’ early work crossed genres and travelled in time with powerful contemporary versions of works by Shakespeare, Brecht, Gershwin, Mozart, Handel and Bach. Later, he collaborated with composer John Adams on operas including Nixon in China, Doctor Atomic and The Death of Klinghoffer. New operas by Kaija Saariaho and Amin Maalouf, Osvaldo Golijov and David Henry Hwang, and Tan Dun join new productions of works by Messiaen, Ligeti, Hindemith, Kurtág and Stravinsky.

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Sellars, who has directed many path-breaking, international festivals, is a resident curator at the Telluride Film Festival and a professor of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. He is the recipient of the 1998 Erasmus Prize for contributions to European culture and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Sellars is a longtime Cal Performances favorite has consistently created stunningly original productions for Bay Area audiences, including *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* (1995), *Peony Pavilion* (1999) and *Kafka Fragments* (2008) and *Winds of Destiny* (2011).

**TONI MORRISON**

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford, in 1931 in Lorain (Ohio), **Toni Morrison** was the second of four children in a black working-class family. She displayed an early interest in literature and studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities, followed by an academic career at Texas Southern University, Howard University, Yale, and since 1989, she has held the Robert F. Goheen Chair in the Humanities at Princeton University. She has also worked as an editor for Random House, a critic, and given numerous public lectures, specializing in African-American literature. She made her debut as a novelist in 1970, soon gaining the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America. A member since 1981 of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she has been awarded a number of literary distinctions, among them the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved* and in 1993 the Nobel Prize in literature.

**ROKIA TRAORÉ**

**Rokia Traoré** is an award-winning Malian singer, songwriter and guitarist. Traoré was born in Mali as a member of the Bambara ethnic group. As her father was a diplomat, she travelled widely in her youth including to Algeria, Saudi Arabia, France and Belgium. As a result of this travel, she was exposed to a wide variety of influences including music from many cultures. While the Bamana have a tradition of griot performing at weddings, members of the nobility such as Traoré are discouraged from performing as musicians. Traoré attended lycée in Mali while her father was stationed in Brussels and started performing publicly as a university student in Bamako. Traoré plays acoustic guitar as well as sings, which is rare for a female in Africa, and she uses vocal harmonies in her arrangements which are also unusual in Malian
music. In 1997, she linked with Mali musician Ali Farka Touré which raised her profile. She won a Radio France Internationale prize as "African Discovery" of 1997, an honor previously won by Mali's Habib Koité. She has produced numerous award-winning albums and has toured the world. This is her second production with Sellars. Their first partnership was the 2001 Wati which depicted a dying Mozart as a griot in ancient West Africa.

**TINA BENKO**

Tina Benko recently appeared in Ivo Van Hove’s production of The Little Foxes and Wallace Shawn's Marie and Bruce. Other New York theater credits include the Broadway productions of Irena’s Vow, Joe Egg, and Top Girls; Helen of Troy in The Age of Iron at CSC; and the New York premieres of Restoration, Dark Yellow, Post-Mortem, Rough Sketch and Charles Mee's Wintertime.

Films include The Avengers, Puccini for Beginners, Photo Op, Lucky Days, The Hungry Ghost, and The Nanny Diaries. She has appeared in workshops of new plays with Lincoln Center Directors Lab, NY Theatre Workshop, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Women’s Project, The Flea, Clubbed Thumb, The Lark, and Williamstown Theatre Festival. Benko has co-written and starred in the plays Gazebo and Crush the Infamous Thing; and is currently directing the solo play Lou based on the memoirs of Lou Andreas Salome. For more information go to tinabenko.com.

**TICKET INFORMATION**

Tickets for Desdemona Wednesday–Saturday, October 26–29 at Zellerbach Playhouse are priced at $100.00. Tickets are available through the Cal Performances Ticket Office at Zellerbach Hall; at (510) 642-9988 to charge by phone; at www.calperformances.org; and at the door. Half-price tickets are available for purchase by UC Berkeley students. UC faculty and staff, senior citizens, other students and UC Alumni Association members receive a $5.00 discount (Special Events excluded). For more information, call Cal Performances at (510) 642-9988, or visit the Cal Performances web site at www.calperformances.org.
For select performances, Cal Performances offers UCB student, faculty and staff, senior and community rush tickets. Rush tickets are announced two hours prior to a performance and are available in person only at the Ticket Office beginning one hour before the performance; quantities may be limited. Rush ticket sales are limited to one ticket per person; all sales are cash only. Rush ticket prices are $10.00 for UCB students; $15.00 for UCB faculty and staff (UCB ID required) and seniors age 65 or older; and $20.00 for all other community members. Information is available at 510-642-9988, press 2 for the rush hotline, two hours prior to a performance only.

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CALENDAR EDITORS, PLEASE NOTE:

CAL PERFORMANCES PRESENTS

Wednesday–Saturday, October 26–29 at 8:00 p.m.         Zellerbach Playhouse, UC Berkeley campus
Bancroft Way at Dana Court, Berkeley

Theater

Desdemona
Peter Sellars, director
Toni Morrison, writer
Rokia Traoré, singer/songwriter, Barbary
Tina Benko, Desdemona
Fatim Kouyaté, vocals
Bintou Soumbounou, vocals
Kadiatou Sangaré, vocals
Mamah Diabaté, n'goni
Mamadyba Camara, kora


Tickets: $100.00, available through the Cal Performances Ticket Office at Zellerbach Hall; at (510) 642-9988 to charge by phone; at www.calperformances.org; and at the door.

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Thursday, October 27 from 5-6:30 p.m. Zellerbach Playhouse, UC Berkeley Campus
Friday, October 28 from noon to 3:00 p.m. Bancroft Way at Dana Court, Berkeley

Symposium

Program: A two-part symposium presented in association with the Doreen B. Townsend Center will be held on Thursday, October 27 from 5-6:30 p.m. and on Friday, October 28 from 12-3:00 p.m. at Zellerbach Playhouse. On October 27, director Peter Sellars will discuss giving voice to the unheard characters in Shakespeare’s Othello. On October 28, three conversations will be held: the first between writer Toni Morrison (via Skype), composer Rokia Traoré and Sellars; the second between UC Berkeley scholars Abdul JanMohamed (English Department), Tamara Roberts (Music Department) and Darieck Scott (African American Studies); and the final, titled Africa Speaks, between Traoré and Sellars. These events are free and open to the public. To learn more, go to calperformances.org.

Tickets: These events are free and open to the public.

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Fri. & Sat., Oct. 28 & 29 from 7-7:30 p.m. Zellerbach Playhouse, UC Berkeley Campus
Sightlines Bancroft Way at Dana Court, Berkeley

Sightlines pre-performance talks will be given by Peter Sellars on Friday, October 28 and Saturday, October 29 at 7:00 p.m. in Zellerbach Playhouse. Sightlines is a continuing program of pre- and post-performance discussions with Cal Performances’ guest artists and scholars, designed to enrich the audience’s experience. These talks are free to event ticket holders.

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