



Ivan Mugemanyi

Saturday, February 21, 2026, 8pm
Zellerbach Playhouse

Somi

with

Toru Dodo, *piano*
Ben Williams, *bass*
Harvel Nakundi, *drums*
Liberty Ellman, *guitar*

*This evening's performance will last approximately 75 minutes
and be performed without intermission.*

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Vocalist, composer, playwright, and actor Somi Kakoma, known in the jazz world simply as “Somi,” was raised between Illinois and Zambia, and is the daughter of immigrants from Uganda and Rwanda. The *New York Times* recently described her as “a virtuosic performer in full command of her instrument and powers.” In March 2022, Somi released her fifth studio album, *Zenzile: The Reimagination of Miriam Makeba*, an all-star tribute album honoring the great South African artist and activist, in commemoration of what would have been the late singer’s 90th birthday. The album, which featured special guests Gregory Porter, Seun Kuti, Angélique Kidjo, Nduduzo Makhathini, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, and Thandiswa Mazwai, won an inaugural Jazz Music Award for Best Vocal Performance. Somi also penned and starred in the companion project to the album, *Dreaming Zenzile*, a critically acclaimed original musical about Makeba, which ran Off-Broadway and toured nationally last season. Prior to the *Zenzile* album, Somi released the unplanned live album *Holy Room*, featuring the Frankfurt Radio Big Band, at the height of the 2020 global lockdown. The album ultimately earned her a 2021 Grammy nomination for Best Jazz Vocal Album, making Somi the first African woman ever nominated in any of the Grammy jazz categories. The album also won an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Jazz Vocal Album. Somi’s previous studio album, *Petite Afrique*, also won an NAACP Image Award and tells the story of a vibrant African immigrant community in the midst of a rapidly gentrifying Harlem in New York City; it was the highly anticipated follow up to Somi’s critically acclaimed major label debut, *The Lagos Music Salon*. In 2024, Somi made her Broadway debut in the world pre-

miere and title role of *Jaja’s African Hair Braiding* by Jocelyn Bioh.

Closely mentored by the legendary trumpet player Hugh Masekela, Somi has carved out her own path as an artist, scholar, and activist. A recipient of the 2023 Doris Duke Artist Award, she is also a Soros Equality Fellow, a United States Artist Fellow, a TED Senior Fellow, a Sundance Theater Fellow, and a former artist in residence at Park Avenue Armory, Captiva at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, the Baryshnikov Arts Center, and UCLA’s Center for the Art of Performance. She is also the founder of Salon Africana, a boutique cultural agency and record label. Often celebrated for the sociopolitical messages inherent to her original songwriting, Somi was asked by Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to perform at the United Nations’ General Assembly in commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Somi holds undergraduate degrees in cultural anthropology and African studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and master’s degrees from both New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts and Harvard University’s Department of Music, where she is currently a PhD candidate. In her heart of hearts, she is an East African Midwestern girl who loves family, poetry, and freedom.

At tonight’s performance, Somi will be previewing some music from her forthcoming album. Other current projects include establishing a more visible ecosystem for jazz musicians on the African continent through Salon Africana.

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