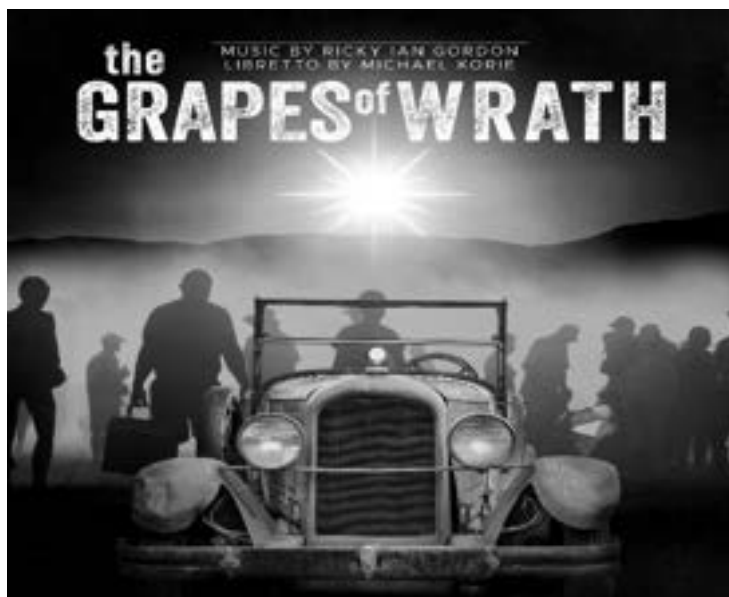




College of Music
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Worthington Family Foundation Opera Theatre Season
MSU OPERA THEATRE



Music by Ricky Ian Gordon - Libretto by Michael Korie

Melanie Helton, stage director
Octavio Más-Arocas, conductor
Zongheng Zhang, assistant conductor

*Generously sponsored by
James and Susan Bonfiglio,
Friends of Jay D. Meetz, the
Eleanor H. and Harold E. Leichenko Opera Endowment
established by Lauren Julius Harris, and the
Richard and Joan Witter Endowment for MSU Opera Theatre*

Wednesday, November 19, 7:00 p.m.
Friday, November 21, 7:00 p.m.
Saturday, November 22, 7:00 p.m.
Sunday, November 23, 2025, 3:00 p.m.
Fairchild Theatre, MSU Auditorium

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* might not seem to be ideal operatic material. But in looking at it objectively, it has all the components of opera: strong central characters, conflict, love, despair, and dreams. Composer Ricky Ian Gordon and librettist Michael Korie have brought all of those things to vibrant life with their adaptation of what is possibly the greatest American novel. The combination of brilliant musical material and stirring, lyrical words makes this a work of surpassing beauty.

To say that this material is topical is undeniable. Poor people thrown off their land by grasping bankers and an uncaring government, families desperately trying to make ends meet, divisive politics that turn Americans against each other – sound familiar? And yet, the tale of the Joad family and their journey from Oklahoma to California still fills us with hope. Ma Joad's belief in the strength of family keeps them going through terrible times. And even when they seem to have lost everything, Rosasharn saves a starving man with milk from her own body.

The opera was premiered in Minnesota in 2006, which MSU Opera Theatre later performed in 2012. In 2018, Opera Theatre of St. Louis commissioned a revised version which is considerably shorter and more concise. We are happy to have restored several scenes from the original, including the stirring aria, "I Can't Tell You", and the scene in the Government Camp supported by the WPA ("People Again"). Many of the students did not realize that the Auditorium Building which contains the Fairchild Theatre was built by the WPA and that Eleanor Roosevelt attended the opening in 1940.

On a personal note, Ricky Ian Gordon and I met in the early 1980s and have been lifelong collaborators and friends. I thank our generous donors who made it possible for Ricky to do a two-week residency in September and attend the final rehearsals and performances. Librettist Michael Korie will also join us for opening night. I am so proud to be bringing this masterpiece to life for our generation of students.

Please note:

*This performance contains scenes of gun violence,
fighting, sexual intimacy, and suicide.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

In order of appearance

	<u>November 19, 22</u>	<u>November 21, 23</u>
Ma Joad , matriarch of an Oklahoma farm family	Xiao Xiao	Meagan Wozny
Pa Joad , her husband	Tyrell Harris	Nick Perkins
Rossasharn Joad , the pregnant daughter	Elia Meekhoff	Amira Coleman
Connie Rivers , her husband	David Meagher	Calvin Aupperlee
Uncle John Joad , Pa's brother	Connor Lindsey	Connor Lindsey
Noah Joad , Simpleminded eldest son	Joseph Baunoch	Eric Bach
Ruthie , youngest Joad daughter	Maco Jeleniewski	Maco Jeleniewski
Winfield , youngest Joad son	Josefina Arnett	Josefina Arnett
Grandpa Joad	Ryan Byrne	Caleb Johnson
Grandma Joad	Hannah Tatay	Riley Piazzon
Tom Joad , recently Released from prison	Tru Neely	Chauncey Burghart
Jim Casy , a lapsed preacher	Cole Harvey	Michael Seare
Al Joad , brother to Tom	Alekzander Lipar	Ethan Staver
Muley Graves , Displaced cropper	Dustin White	
Muley's wife	Makinsey Rosser	
Muley's daughter	Julia Clark	
Pete Fowler , Tractor operator	Jonathan Dahn	
Senator	R.J. Kilcher	
Ragged Man , a Starving cropper	R.J. Kilcher	
Car Salesmen:	R.J. Kilcher, Andrew Burns, Dustin White	
Mae , a truck stop waitress	Fengzhen Liu	Amaya Morren
Val , her short-order cook husband	Mason Myatt	
Bill, Joe , truckers	R.J. Kilcher, Dustin White	
Peach Checker	Grace Cox	
Washroom Attendant	Giavanna Coffman	

CAST OF CHARACTERS (cont.)

Cabin Mistress	Janae Washington
Contractor	Andrew Burns
Camp Guard	Yifeng Li
Deputy	Mason Myatt
George	Andrew Burns
Sarah, soprano soloist	Makinsey Rosser
Sarah's husband	Dustin White
Starving Man's Son	Julia Clark
Starving Man	Andrew Burns

Croppers, Bank Tellers, Okies, Constables, Strikers: Hannah Bancroft, Avery Beeman, Krista Bennett, Julia Clark, Giovanna Coffman, Grace Cox, Makinsey Rosser, Janae Washington, Johnathan Dahn, R.J. Kilcher, Yifeng Li, Mason Myatt, Andrew Burns, Dustin White

STAFF FOR MSU OPERA THEATRE

Music Director	Octavio Más-Arocas
Producer	Melanie Helton
Set and Projection Design	D.J. Selmayer
Set Construction/Technical Director	D.J. Selmayer
Lighting Design	Brent Wrobel*
Costume Designer	Melanie Helton, BreAnne Turner
Wig and Makeup Design	Martha Ruskai*
Guest Coach	Tessa Hartle*
Production Stage Manager	Ally Doederlein
Assistant Stage Manager	Kate Shaffer
Assistant to Melanie Helton	Michael Seare
Musical Preparation	Elden Little, Tessa Hartle*
Assistant Conductor	Zongheng Zhang
Costume Assistant	BreAnne Turner
Rehearsal Accompanist	Jiayin Zhang, Luming Yang
Fairchild Theatre Operations Manager	Nick Raffaele
Fairchild Theatre Stage Manager	James Peters
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Budget Officer	Andrea Worful
Financial Officer for MSU Opera Theatre	Renee Graff
Video Artist	Andrew Acciaoli
Chorus Master	Ben Saunders
Intimacy/Fight Coordinator	Alexis Black
*Guest Artist	

*The Friday evening performance Act I will be conducted by
Zongheng Zhang, assistant conductor*

Grateful Acknowledgments

James Forger, Dean, College of Music

MSU Vocal Arts Area Faculty: Jane Bunnell, Marc Embree, Derrick Fox, Richard Fracker (chair), Melanie Helton, Harlan Jennings, Elden Little, Anne Nispel, Mark Rucker, Sadie Rucker, Sandra Snow

Deborah Moriarty, Chair, Piano Area; Zhihua Tang, Collaborative Piano

MSU Department of Theatre

Ann-Marie Lindley, Director of Development, College of Music

College of Music Staff: Lynne Funk, Katie Bethel, Shawn Mahorney, Amy Rivard, Tom March, Renee Graff, Justin Baker, Christopher Kiminski, Ryan Shaw

MSU Opera Theatre is proud to announce that our 2023 production of Verdi's *Falstaff* was awarded the American Prize for University Opera Production. Our staging of *Don Giovanni* earned third prize in Division VII of the National Opera Association Competition and second prize in the American Prize Opera Competition. Additionally, *A Little Night Music* received second prize in Division IV of the National Opera Association Competition and was honored with first prize from the American Prize for University Musical Theatre Productions.

More information about the composer and librettist can be found at www.rickyiangordon.com and www.michaelkorie.com.

**Join us for our Spring 2026
Operas of Comedy and Consequence**

La Cambiale di Matrimonio and Suor Angelica

**March 25 – March 29, 2026
Fairchild Theatre**

SYNOPSIS

Act I

It is the mid-1930's, at the height of the Dust Bowl. The sharecroppers of Oklahoma try to remember "The Last Time There Was Rain" as they suffer through the enormous dust storms that decimated the Plains states. The Joad family, generational sharecroppers from Oklahoma, have decided to relocate to California in search of work after their home was bulldozed by the bank. Tom Joad, the second eldest son, is being released from MacAllister Prison after serving four years for manslaughter in a bar fight ("I Keep My Nose Clean of Trouble"). As he heads back home, he runs into Jim Casy, a preacher who he knew from home. Casy has renounced his profession after sampling the delights of women too often ("Jesus was My Saviour/Naked Tree"). Tom invites Casy to come home with him. When they arrive at the Joad homestead, they find a bulldozed home with a neighbor, Muley Graves, wandering outside. Muley explains that the Joads have moved to their Uncle John's cabin, which is also slated to be bulldozed. Muley recounts the process of being shoved off their land by a succession of institutions which show no mercy nor understanding. In the melee of protest, Muley's child is shot and killed ("Not My Fault").

Tom arrives home and finds the family packing to go to California. As he is reunited with his mother, she worries that he has been tainted by his jail experience ("Promise Me, Tommy"). He assures her that he kept his nose clean of trouble. The rest of the family reunites with Tom, wondering if he bust out of jail. He explains he was paroled as his simple-minded oldest brother Noah shows him that he has learned to tie his own shoes ("You Can't Keep a Joad in Jail"). Tom's brother, Al, has gone off to buy a truck for their journey and is hustled by used car salesmen ("Good Cars"). Grandma and Grandpa have a funny moment ("Tricky Old Devil") which turns serious when Grandpa has a tantrum and does not want to leave his land. Grandma doses him with her famous "Soothin' Syrup". As the family finishes packing, Ma reflects on the things that life brings us and what must be taken and what left behind ("Us").

The family and all the Okies take off on Route 66, heading for California ("Head Down the Plenty Road") where they run into civilians unhappy with the mass exodus of refugees. The family stops at a roadside camp filled with Okies on the road. There, hustlers hand out handbills advertising thousands of jobs in California. Pa is excited about the future when a ragged man

appears out of nowhere. He has been to California where his wife and children starved to death. He explains that they advertise a thousand jobs when there are mere numbers of them (“I Can’t Tell You”). Even in the face of this testimony, Pa remains hopeful. Pregnant daughter, Rosasharn, and her husband, Connie Rivers, grab a moment on an overpass over Route 66, talking of their plans for the future. They watch a Lincoln Zephyr go by which hatches their dreams of success. Rosasharn tells Connie she only needs one star to wish on (“Lincoln Zephyr/One Star”). In the meantime, Grandpa has died and is buried by the side of the road. A reluctant Casy says a prayer over his burial (“A Word for this Old Man”). The family sets out on Route 66 again (“Us Reprise”).

At a truck stop, the waitress Mae is singing the praises of truck drivers, who are polite and tip well. Pa, Ruthie, and Winfield come in to try to buy ten cents worth of bread for Grandma, who has become seriously ill. Mae at first snaps at him, but her husband, Val, tells her to just give them the loaf. As they turn to leave, Pa notices that there is penny candy. Mae’s heart melts when she sees the two kids, and she gives them two candy sticks for a penny, not the nickel they really cost. The truck drivers leave her a big tip and she praises them again (“Truck Drivers”). The family is crossing the Mojave at night, each musing about their own situations (“Dry Blue Night”). Grandma has died next to Ma, but the family has to get through the desert. As dawn breaks, the Joads are stopped by an inspector who tells them that they have reached California. The dream, for the moment, has come through, even though they have lost both grandparents on the trip (“California, Like They Promised”).

Act II

The family has landed at a squatter’s camp, nicknamed “Hooverville” in honor of the President many feel caused the Depression. Al is disgusted by the surroundings and confronts Pa. Connie chimes in with disdain for the situation in which they find themselves. Al claims he will go off on his own, but Ma puts her foot down, saying “No One is Going”. Rosasharn tries to put a good face on things but Connie has had enough. As he runs off, Rosasharn feels her baby kick for the first time and tells him she will name him Moses. Uncle John, back from a booze-filled bender, overhears Rosasharn name her baby.

At a government refugee camp, the Joads find respite. Ruthie and Winfield discover their first flush toilet. Rosasharn is distraught by Connie's disappearance and Ma tells her that she has to go on, no matter what ("People Again"). Tom, Casy, and Al run into a contractor claiming to have lots of jobs available. When they challenge him, the deputy sheriff chases Tom, who knocks him out. Casy takes the blame and the deputy takes him to jail.

The Joads finally find work at Hooper Ranch picking peaches. But even with the whole family picking, there is not enough money to live on or even to eat ("Five Cents a Box"). Pa is breaking down, unable to feed his family. There is ruckus from outside the fence from strikers when Tom and Al go for a walk. Outside the fence Tom is stopped by some strikers when their leader arrives. Tom is surprised that it is Casy, out of jail and leading the strike. Casy explains to Tom that in jail, he figured things out. He tells Tom that most jailbirds are not bad, just needy. Tom says his family is needy too, which is why they accept the poor wages. Casy says that if they are going to survive, they have to fight back against oppression. Tom finally understands the nature of things ("Things Turn Around"). Two vigilantes arrive and in the ensuing fight Casy is killed. Al tries to get Tom to run. Later that evening, Ma meets Tom outside the fence for one last time. She knows he has to run to avoid the law. He tells her that he is going to go to Los Angeles and fight for the common man's right. Although she is heartbroken, Ma is filled with pride ("I'll Be There").

After the drought, it begins to rain. The pickers are terrified at the oncoming deluge and flash floods. Rosasharn has gone into labor and gives birth to a stillborn child. Ma tells Uncle John the baby must be buried. After thinking of his own dead wife and child, he says that he won't put the baby in the ground. Instead, like the baby's namesake Moses, he will give the child to the river ("Little Dead Moses").

Al and Uncle John have disappeared into the flood as Ma, Pa, Rosasharn, and the kids travel over muddy roads to find shelter in the rain. In a deserted barn, they find a starving man and his young son. The son implores the Joads to help. His father is dying. Ma looks at Rosasharn, who realizes that she can save him with the milk from her body. As she feeds the starving man, she finds her "One Star" of hope.

MSU SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Katherine Kilburn, conductor

Zongheng Zhang, assistant conductor

Violin I

Qingzhuo Li
Diya Dong
Chonghua Zuo
Amy Chang
Yulin Zhou
Wang Liang
Layang Ka
Zenán Li
Jungmin Lee

Violin II

Runqi Weng
Farangiz
Takhirova
Hsin-Jen Yang
Tadan Baartz-
Bowman
You-Jung Hsu
Kieran Venugopal
Xinying Hu
Selin Samsar

Viola

Yifei Wang
Tirian Cooper
Qiongwen Zhang
Xinye Xu
Aidan Chapman-
Anderson

Cello

Tung-An Chien
Weigen Jiang
Weian Gu
Cheng-Hung
Chung
Nolan Wiebenga

Bass

Sam Stover
Manyi Zhang
Parker Duncan

Flute

Alex Coble
Morgan Page

Oboe

Emily Quintana
Ari VanderLaan

Clarinet

Chang Shu
Jake Basil

Saxophone

Parker Fritz

Bassoon

Rosalie Trueback
Katherine Dahn

Horn

Reed Fitzpatrick
Alden Leonard

Trumpet

Natalia Vela
Evelyn Szilagyi

Trombone

Jordan Dove
Michael Gabriel
Jonah Weller

Harp

Serenity Flores

Piano

Ruoyang (Rena)
Wang

Keyboard

Guitar/Banjo

Jiayin Zhang

Rehearsal

Pianists

Jiayin Zhang
Luming Yang

Percussion

Taryn Parry
Ben Lober
Kayla Mears

Assistant

Conductor

Zongheng Zhang

Librarians

Tadan Baartz-
Bowman
Aaron Longuski

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2025-2026 Season

MSU Opera Society is the community support organization of the MSU Opera Theatre. With grateful appreciation, we acknowledge the following members of the MSU Opera Society at Michigan State University beginning July 1, 2024- June 30, 2025. We are grateful to our members for their generous contributions.

The 2025-26 MSU Opera Theatre season is generously funded by the Worthington Family Foundation.

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Opera Theatre

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For information about the MSU Opera Society, please contact the College of Music Advancement Office at (517) 353-9872 or e-mail Ann-Marie Lindley at alindley@msu.edu.