

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now For the first time, a Hmong story heads for the opera**  
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CATHY WURZER: It's been said that writing an opera is a composer's ultimate challenge. What if you're a celebrated author? I'd venture to guess that writing the text for an opera is also a big job.

In a few days, Saint Paul writer Kao Kalia Yang will see her family's story put to music and on stage, performed by the Minnesota Opera. In 2016, she wrote *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father*. It tells the story of Kalia's family and her poet father, as war drives them from the Mountains of Laos into a Thai refugee camp and, ultimately, to this country as newcomers.

Thursday, that story will have its debut at the Minnesota Opera, in English and Hmong. Kalia joins us right now to talk about it. I am so happy to talk with you again, Kalia. How have you been?

**KAO KALIA** I've been good. Thank you so much for having me, Cathy.

**YANG:**

**CATHY** Thanks for being here. I recall talking to you about *The Song Poet* when the book first came out, and your dad kind of laughed at you, when you suggested you wanted to write about him. He has such a good story. How might you describe what sparked *The Song Poet*, the book?

**KAO KALIA** *The Song Poet* was my-- I see it as now it was an opportunity for me to get my father to lift his spirits a little bit. **YANG:** My dad had just lost his job, along with 14 other Hmong coworkers, and he would get dressed for work but have nowhere to go. And so one day I said, daddy, how did you become a song poet in the Hmong tradition?

And my father said to me, after my father died, my mother had nine children to feed. She took to the mountains and the fields to find food for us. I used to go to the houses of neighbors and friends to listen for the beautiful things that they had to say to each other. One day, the words came out on a sigh, and a song was born.

And I said, daddy, that's so beautiful. Maybe that is the beginning of my next book, and he said, maybe it's the ending. And then he looked at me, and he said, nobody wants to read a book about a man with rough hands. We live in a world where presidents write books about themselves.

**CATHY** Oh, no. He, of course, he's such a humble man. And for folks who are not familiar with the role of a song poet in **WURZER:** Hmong culture, how do you explain that?

**KAO KALIA** A song poet documents common experiences, personal tragedies, and sings them to a bigger world. A song poet **YANG:** must have a beautiful voice, an incredibly poetic and agile mind. Songs are not written, they are remembered. And the song poet sings so that others can remember, so that communities can grieve together.

**CATHY** When your dad sings, do other Hmong people know that he lived in Laos? Can they determine where he lived **WURZER:** because of his words?

**KAO KALIA** Yes, because it's regional. My father is very much the Hmong of Xiangkhouang. The White Hmong, when he **YANG:** sings, the style of a singing will peg him immediately.

**CATHY** Ah. Now, you are making some history. This is the first Hmong story adopted-- adapted, I should say, as an **WURZER:** opera, and you are the librettist. How did that happen?

**KAO KALIA YANG:** Minnesota Opera's Jamie Andrews, who is no longer with them, but Jamie Andrews read *The Song Poet* and emailed me one day and said, would you like to meet? And in that meeting, Jamie said *The Song Poet* is the stuff of operas. Would you be interested? And I said, of course.

In the beginning, I was not the librettist on the project, and I didn't think I would be. I can barely sing, Cathy. In the sweet words of my father, my voice can be a little bothersome. So I never saw myself as a librettist.

Opera as a form. It's not one of the most accessible forms, especially for first-generation refugee families living in poverty. And so I was astounded, but when the both accomplished librettists couldn't quite do justice to the work, I knew that I had to step up. I knew that there was an opportunity, and I knew that if I had an opportunity to learn, that maybe I could do what I had done in *The Song Poet*, the book. And so I took that opportunity to learn.

**CATHY WURZER:** I could only imagine that it was almost like drinking from a fire hose. There's just so much to learn.

**KAO KALIA YANG:** Yes, so very much to learn, but also this promise glimmering at the end-- if I could do this, what could it mean to some other child out there who comes from, perhaps, a similar background, who dreams of such places in the world, such possibilities. And that has always been the reason why I've done-- I have become in so many ways, and so that spark drew me.

**CATHY WURZER:** Did your dad have a role in the production? Did he have an opportunity with his background to work with say you and the composer?

**KAO KALIA YANG:** Yes, because my father is a singer. And so I have Hmong lines in the libretto, and my father had to set them. He had to sing them in so many ways. So Jocelyn Hagan, the composer, could set them and notate them for the musicians on the project. So my father actually has credit on the score as well.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh, nice. Was it emotional when you first heard the songs?

**KAO KALIA YANG:** I went to the workshop. It was my birthday, December, and it was the first time I heard the songs from the performers. It was incredibly moving. I could feel my heart heating up and then the liquid, of course, falling.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh. What about casting? Did you have an opportunity to meet with the cast?

**KAO KALIA YANG:** I have, and I sat through auditions for, I think, three of the nights. It was incredibly powerful for me to see, especially so you have world singers from around the world. Because there aren't that many opera roles-- wholesome, accurate, truthful, dignified opera roles for Asian-American singers and Asian singers, we drew talent from around the world.

But walking into one of the auditions, and I remember the first day, there was a 15-year-old Hmong boy walking in in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. And my heart started hammering, but it was incredibly courageous. He took one look at us, and he opened his mouth, and he did what he came to do. And so it was incredibly powerful as a first experience, but also as an experience of so many talented people from around the world, and then these young people.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh. Kalia, I'm so happy that you had the opportunity to do this. I'm hoping that your mom and dad, of course, will be in the audience for the opening and probably to see a number of the different performances. Have they seen any rehearsals?

**KAO KALIA YANG:** They have not.

**CATHY WURZER:** OK.

**KAO KALIA YANG:** So March 23rd, the whole family will go, and they wanted to go with the grandchildren. So they will be there with their grandkids, and all of them will see an opera for the first time. And Cathy, I can't believe that the first opera they see will be a Hmong opera, that it will be *The Song Poet*.

**CATHY WURZER:** That's so important.

**KAO KALIA YANG:** It is. My mom says, what if I cry? And I tell her, it's OK if you cry, and it's OK if you don't.

**CATHY WURZER:** Did I hear this right, Kalia, that the production has been sold out, even well, well before-- like months and months ago?

**KAO KALIA YANG:** Yes. I understand that it is the first Minnesota Opera mainstage production to have sold out six months before its premiere date.

**CATHY WURZER:** Wow. Wow. That's got to tell you something. The Hmong community must be just so excited about this.

**KAO KALIA YANG:** I believe we are, but it's also, of course, because it's one of the first, there's some apprehension. How is it going to go? How is this thing going to come together?

But we're in good hands. Rick Shiomi is directing. Jocelyn Hagan is so talented. The whole team, the cast, oh, this is the biggest artistic team that I've been a part of, and everybody is such a professional.

**CATHY WURZER:** I would love to see what your mom and dad say. Can you-- sitting in the audience, and if I'm you, probably giving my dad sidelong glances to see what his reactions are. I wonder if your heart will be pounding.

**KAO KALIA YANG:** Oh, I think about the launch of *The Song Poet*, the book. I could not look in my father's direction, because every time I did, my own tears would start falling.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh.

**KAO KALIA YANG:** I have a feeling it'll be a similar night.

**CATHY WURZER:** I bet it will be. I wish you all the best, as always, Kalia. You're just so amazing, and best of luck with this.

**KAO KALIA  
YANG:**

Thank you so much, Cathy. I'm excited for audiences to see this thing that's been in the works for five years.

**CATHY  
WURZER:**

Wow. Thank you. Take care of yourself. Kao Kalia Yang is the author of *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father*. It'll be premiering at the Minnesota Opera, this Thursday, March the 9th. You can find Kalia at her website, by the way, [KaoKaliaYang.com](http://KaoKaliaYang.com).