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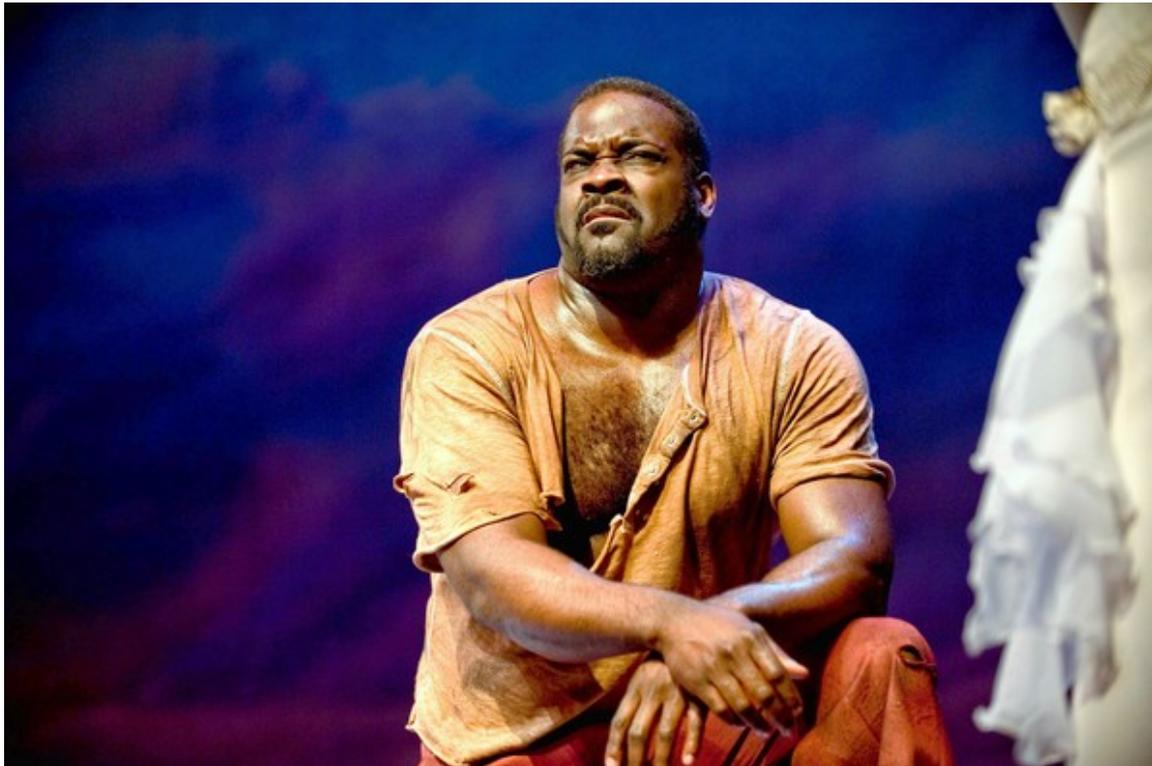
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For Phillip Lamar Boykin, Opera Success Is A Dream Come True



Phillip Lamar Boykin, a 1995 graduate of the Hartt School of Music, plays the villain Crown in "Porgy and Bess" June 8 to June 13 at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts in Hartford. (Photo © Sarah Shatz)

By ARRAGON PERRONE

When he was a boy, Phillip Lamar Boykin had a dream. One of nine siblings growing up in Greenville, S.C., he wrote a to-do list that included the release date for his first CD. His ultimate goal was to be a famous opera singer.

The 1995 Hartt School graduate has accomplished that dream, with extensive performance credits and a National Broadway Theatre Awards nomination for best actor in a musical for his role as Joe in the national tour of "Show Boat."

Boykin returns to Hartford in the role of Crown in "Porgy and Bess," playing June 8 to 13 at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts in Hartford. The show is part of the opera's 75th anniversary tour. Ticket prices range from \$15 to \$72.

We spoke with Boykin about the show:

Q: To someone who has never seen "Porgy and Bess," how would you describe the show?

A: "Porgy and Bess" is a love story. It tells the story of a cripple who falls in love with a woman who was formerly tied up in drugs and has an abusive husband. The husband kills someone and has to go into hiding. While the husband is in hiding, Porgy is the only one who will take her in... and they have a wonderful romance, and at the end of the opera, Bess chooses to go back to her life of drugs. I play Crown, the villain of the piece, if you will.

Q: How does "Porgy and Bess" remain relevant in the 21st century?

A: The kinds of things that went on in the community of the show, called Catfish Row, those kinds of things are still going on today. Like on the drug level. Back then, it was a powdered heroin, and today there's, if you would like to compare it to, crack cocaine that's used in low-income neighborhoods. It's also relevant because the situations are very familiar. What went on there is still going on today. And the music and the characters, these are things you would hear today on the radio somewhere, or see them in a neighborhood.

Q: You received praise and a Broadway Theatre Awards nomination for your performance of Joe in "Show Boat" — a much different character than Crown. Was Crown a difficult part to play since he is the villain?

A: No. Offstage, I think most of my friends would say that I am a very kind, loving and caring guy, but onstage, playing Crown, it's like some type of therapy for me. It allows me to express some anger and to release any tension or frustrations that I may have with something that is going on in my day-to-day life. So I love playing the role.

Q: George Gershwin, the writer of "Porgy and Bess," is an American music legend. How do you try to remain faithful to his music while also adding something of yourself to it?

A: Since it was written for the African American opera singer, it's natural; it's written in there. And even if I don't add a thing, if I just sing what's on the page, it's still part of my heritage.

The director, Charles Randolph-Wright, said we have to begin taking these things back, to reclaim them – to reclaim the gospel kind of singing that's in the opera, reclaim the vocal styling of the opera. We've always had people who sing like that. But a lot of people shy away from performing "Porgy and Bess" because they don't want to be labeled a "Porgy and Bess" performer.

Q: How do you think the Hartt School of Music prepared you for your career?

A: I would not be where I am in my musical career if I had not gone to Hartt. And it's mainly due to the voice teacher I had there, Fredric Moses. ... Many times I had problems affording the Hartt School. I didn't have any money, but I came to believe I could be an opera singer in high school. I went to South Carolina School of the Arts, and from there, South Carolina State College, and then I met Fredric Moses. ... And he put me on a full scholarship, so many times I didn't have the money to stay at Hartt, but I found out later, after I graduated, that the dean, Larry Alan Smith, and Fredric Moses would put money on my account out of their own pockets. It's just so amazing, so I wouldn't be where I am now if it hadn't been for the Hartt School hiring Fredric Moses and Larry Alan Smith.

Q: Does coming back to Hartford have special meaning for you?

A: Oh yes, especially performing at the Bushnell. I've only performed there one other time, and it was with the Hartford Symphony. And to come back now, 2010, and to be one of the major characters in the opera is a real thrill for me, and it feels like a real dream come true.

GEORGE GERSHWIN'S PORGY AND BESS runs June 8 to 13 at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, 166 Capitol Ave., Hartford. Tickets are \$15 to \$72. Information: 860-987-5900 or <http://www.bushnell.org>.