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Opera Review: Attention to detail, sensitive direction pay off in 'Porgy'

By CHRISTOPHER HYDE

So many great sopranos and bass-baritones have sung the title roles that it is little short of amazing that the new road show, which came to Merrill Auditorium on Friday night under the auspices of Portland Ovations, could hold the interest through three hours on Catfish Row.

That it did so is due not only to a fine cast but also to the sensitive direction of Charles Randolph-Wright in this 75th anniversary production.

Randolph-Wright's intention was to restore the dignity of the characters in the tragic opera and to avoid – as much as possible in a libretto written in the 1930s – racial stereotypes.

He has succeeded extremely well, so much so that the characters become what playwright DuBose Heyward and the Gershwin brothers intended – universal. Sportin' Life, sung and danced brilliantly by Reggie Whitehead, is as close to Mephistopheles as is possible without horns and a tail.

The direction transforms stereotypes by means of historical accuracy and by treating Gullah religious traditions seriously. An example is the telling Dr. Jesus scene, in which Serena, sung by Reyna Carguill, performs what is essentially a shamanic healing ritual on Bess.

Small details, such as the authentic vending cries of crab, honey and strawberry vendors, add to the accuracy, as do the costuming and cleverly designed moving sets.

At the picnic on Kittiwah Island, the wreck of the sailboat, from which Crown emerges, is straight out of the Winslow Homer painting "The Gulf Stream," with all of its grisly connotations. Crown, sung by Phillip Boykin, has the doomed chutzpah of Peter Grimes.

A few instances, such as the confrontations between Catfish Row's inhabitants and the crooked white policeman, speak of centuries of oppression.

On the subject of details, the well-choreographed stage action between Sportin' Life and the shopkeeper, Maria (Stephanie Beadle), in which she threatens, quite believably, to cut him up, is worth the price of admission.

It is the music, of course, that makes this opera universal. Anyone who is unmoved by "Bess, You is My Woman Now" or "Summertime" must have the musical sensibility of Ulysses S. Grant.

What surprised me, after not having heard "Porgy and Bess" for a long time, is how thoroughly written out it is. Virtually everything is sung, and spoken lines are few and far between.

If I had any quarrel with the production, it would be with the use of pop-song ornamentation in the primary arias, reminiscent of too many versions of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Gershwin would have wanted them sung straight. The final scene, in which Porgy's friends are reluctant to tell him of Bess' departure, is heart-rending, but it went on a little too long.

The cast, and musical director Pacien Mazzagatti, received a well-deserved standing ovation from a large crowd.