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# 'Porgy and Bess' coming to Bushnell in Hartford

It's going to be "a night at the opera" beginning Tuesday at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts in Hartford, where a new production of "Porgy and Bess" celebrates the 75th anniversary of George Gershwin's enduring masterpiece.

Staged with the full approval of the Gershwin estate by veteran opera producer Michael Capasso, general director of New York's vibrant Dicapo Opera, "Porgy and Bess" is directed by Charles Randolph-Wright whose film "Mama I Want to Sing" will be released this fall.



"I've been interested in producing 'Porgy and Bess' for years, but never had the right circumstances until recently when many things came together from the right director to its 75th anniversary, and an initial tour to build upon," said Capasso.

Now on a 32-city tour of the United States, the production features a live orchestra with new arrangements by music director Pacien Mazzagatti, new sets designed by John Farrell and new costumes created by Ildiko Marta Debreczeni.

"The show has a good libretto and a wonderfully powerful story with some unbelievably great music, but at the end of the day it really is the music that sets it apart and carries the show," said Capasso.

Passion, jealousy, murder, and poverty fuel an emotional story about Porgy, a downtrodden but generous beggar who haunts the streets known as "Catfish Row," a poor district of early 20th century segregated Charleston, South Carolina. Ardently in love with the prostitute Bess, Porgy has to share his affections with her violent former lover Crown and the roguish suitor Sportin' Life.

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Written by George Gershwin to a libretto by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin, “Porgy and Bess” has enjoyed spectacular fame worldwide since its first modest production in New York City in October 1935. Considered an operatic masterpiece by critics, it has spawned a string of hit songs that have become international icons of the American tradition including “Summertime,” “I Got Plenty of Nuttin” and “It Ain’t Necessarily So.”

Although Gershwin had hoped for “Porgy and Bess” to be premiered at the Metropolitan Opera, his plans were thwarted by the sudden death of Metropolitan Opera board chairman Otto Kahn. The opera toured Europe and North and South America throughout the 1950s, and it was the first work by an American to be produced at La Scala in Milan, Italy. It enjoyed tremendous success at the Vienna Volksoper, Leningrad’s Palace of Culture, and London’s Stoll Theatre. The work was not widely accepted in the United States as “real” opera until 1976 when the Houston Grand Opera staged it with the original score and orchestration. Nine years later, the Met gave its first performance of “Porgy and Bess,” which included its Saturday afternoon live broadcast series.

Capasso said not enough people have been exposed to opera in the United States because of an ongoing perception of the art form.

“They think of it as snobby.....with women in hats and men in tuxedos....not as something the average person can enjoy. But opera is something everyone should be able to enjoy, there’s nothing about it that you should be afraid of,” said Capasso.