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Porgy and Bess comes to Miami



Actors perform a scene from the *Porgy and Bess* show.

By **KIMBERLY GRANT**

It's not all of the time that a supporting actor is billed before the actors playing the title characters of a production. But when you're Reggie Whitehead, who is well-respected among his peers, it's only natural.

"(Reggie) has such presence as a performer and an incredibly graceful way of moving and performing. That's luxury casting," said Elaine Rinaldi, the artistic director and conductor of Orchestra Miami, about Whitehead. "He has the talent to sing the part, with a combination of pop, gospel, range and style, with the added feature of being an opera singer."

Rinaldi will conduct the Miami Orchestra during the 75th Anniversary edition of *Porgy and Bess*.

Come March 14, the Gershwin's opera, *Porgy and Bess*, will play to a South Florida audience in the Miami-Dade Auditorium. In its 26-city tour, *Porgy and Bess* Florida stops will include Jacksonville, Daytona, Miami, Sarasota, Lakeland and Melbourne. Whitehead will play the role of Sportin' Life, who he describes as a "manipulator" and "a happy, dust-dealing, pimp-type person who wants to spirit Bess away."

"The Gershwin's don't just allow anyone to do this show," said Whitehead, about the currently touring opera, which has the full approval of the Gershwin estate. "It's very

close to their hearts."

The original opera is based on the 1924 DuBose Heyward novel called *Porgy*. In 1934, George Gershwin read the book and contacted Heyward and his wife Dorothy to work with him to write an opera based on the story. *Porgy and Bess* debuted in 1935 and has undergone many renditions in stage production, film and song.

The storyline of each version of the opera, for the most part, remains the same: Porgy, a crippled black man, living in the slum of Charleston, SC, takes in a discarded woman named Bess. He ends up having to fight to keep her away from Crown, her boyfriend, and Sportin' Life, the town drug dealer.

"Sammy Davis Jr. in *Porgy and Bess* was my impetus to want to do theater," said Whitehead, a Miami native in his 50s, who was inspired to act while watching Davis play Sportin' Life in the 1959 film version. "It's a role I've wanted to do since I was 10 years old. It's been a dream come true."

Whitehead's first opportunity to play Sportin' Life came in 2008, when he performed in St. Petersburg and Moscow, in Russia. This, his second opportunity, he's very excited to play the iconic character to his hometown audience.

"I have been working on this role all of

my life, just preparing for that one day when I would be able to do it," said Whitehead of the Michael Capasso for DiCapo Opera's version of *Porgy and Bess*. Capasso, who is working with Willette Murphy Klausner, has commissioned Charles Randolph-White to direct the 75th Anniversary edition of the opera. This tour is the original Gershwin version, which was cut down from version that debuted in 1935. The 75th Anniversary cast includes Kishna Davis as Bess and Patrick Blackwell as Porgy.

Whitehead, a singer, actor, dancer, choreographer, and director, has performed, choreographed, and directed locally and internationally in productions like *Pippin*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *A Chorus Line*, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, *The Full Monty*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *The Wiz*. He's won the South Florida Carbonell Award three times. In 2002, he won Best Supporting Actor in a Musical for *Smokey Joe's Café*. In 2003, he won Best Choreography, for *Zombie Prom*. And, in 2007, he won for Best Supporting Actor in a Musical again for *The Full Monty*, in which he briefly appeared nude.

"My performance is an amalgam of everything I've seen and everything I've ever heard of *Porgy and Bess*," said Whitehead, who serves as a member of the Board of Trustees for the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables. "It's been a whirlwind event for me that I've thoroughly enjoyed."

After taking a break from theater two and half years ago and moving to New York City, Whitehead realized that he still had a passion for performing and is enjoying every minute of it. He'll next tour with the Chicago Sinfonietta, in 2011. From there, Whitehead plans to continue working in his passion.

"I will continue to sing and dance as long as my legs and voice hold out," Whitehead said. "As long as I can continue; I will stick around."

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IF YOU GO

WHAT: 75th Anniversary of the Gershwin's
Porgy and Bess

WHEN: 3 p.m. March 14

WHERE: Miami-Dade Auditorium
2901 W Flagler St. Miami, FL 33135

COST: \$25 - \$65

For general information visit www.orchestramiami.org, call the box office at 800-745-3000 or visit www.ticketmaster.com; group sales call 305-274-2103; box office is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 305-547-5414