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'Porgy and Bess' onstage in Van Wert

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VAN WERT — The American opera, "Porgy and Bess," will debut a five-year international tour Thursday at Niswonger Performing Arts Center, and director Charles Randolph-Wright will be front and center for this brand new performance.

"I'm actually coming to this one because it is our first performance on the road," Wright said from his New York office. "After that, I'll drop in from time to time, but I want to make certain this first time is perfect," he said.

Although Wright has directed theater and films, this project marks his first opera.

"I wanted to make certain that we approached this as an opera as opposed to a theatrical piece. With the exception of only a few lines, it's all sung," Wright said.

But the music is far from the only challenge in bringing this 75-year-old piece, penned by

AT A GLANCE

- **What:** "Porgy and Bess"
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday
- **Where:** Niswonger Performing Arts Center, Van Wert
- **Tickets:** \$20 to \$45 at www.npacww.org

George Gershwin, to the stage. "Our biggest challenge is the images. In the past it has been said this show perpetuates the stereotypes of color that people want to get past. For years, that has kept blacks away from this show. I wanted to find a way to look at it through a 2010 image. I'm coming at it from today's mentality. I'm bringing a different energy to the show from what it was," Wright said.

The show, set in Charleston, S.C., focuses on the downtrodden beggar Porgy, who is in love with the prostitute, Bess. The show originally opened

in 1935.

"I grew up in South Carolina, and I have relatives still in the Charleston area. For 'Porgy and Bess,' I showed the designers pictures of my relatives and said this is how I want these characters to look. No burlap bags on stage. I want this to be real," Wright said.

"I think we're empowering Porgy in a way different than what we've seen before. We're taking this classic, and reclaiming it. We want to be proud of these extraordinary people. It was written to reflect black America in a context different from the stereotypes of that day, and we're making certain that the characters are people who are fully realized even today. We want them to be fully realized and fully recognized. This show is a favorite of mine. It's got such rich music, and a story that is truly astonishing and exciting," Wright said.

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