

HEMSING ASSOCIATES

401 East 80th Street, Suite 14H
New York, NY 10075-0650
Tel.: 212/772-1132
Fax: 212/628-4255
E-mail: jhemsing@hemsingpr.com

THE MIAMI HERALD

Miami, FL

March 12, 2010

It's not too soon for a little 'Summertime': 'Porgy and Bess' at 75

BY GREG STEPANICH



Reggie Whitehead, veteran South Florida actor, plays Sportin' Life in *Porgy and Bess*, in town Sunday only. Seventy-five years ago, a young New York-based composer wintering in Palm Beach was busy orchestrating a theater piece he was certain would be his finest achievement.

The project was *Porgy and Bess*, and because George Gershwin had less than two years to live after its October 1935 premiere, it is, indeed, his crowning glory, an achievement that, in the opinion of opera historian Elise Kirk, "placed American opera firmly on the world's cultural map."

Sunday afternoon, Orchestra Miami will team with a national touring company for a performance at Miami-Dade County Auditorium. The production, presented by Michael Capasso, general director of New York's Dicapo Opera Theatre, comes in the middle of a three-month, 26-city anniversary tour.

The 31-member cast is directed by Charles Randolph-Wright and stars South Florida theater veteran Reggie Whitehead as Sportin' Life, Patrick Blackwell as Porgy and Kishna Davis as Bess. Conducting will be Orchestra Miami founder Elaine Rinaldi.

Rinaldi, who, like Whitehead, is a native Miamian, says that although she was familiar with the opera's beloved hit tunes -- *Summertime*, *It Ain't Necessarily So*, *I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'* -- she was hardly prepared for the surprises she discovered in Gershwin's score.

"It was a revelation," she says. "Every compositional technique of the early 20th century is in that score.

"One of the great geniuses of this work is the compositional technique, how he takes all the Tin Pan Alley rhythms and dance motifs and subtly interweaves them into this complex structure. So you're getting a dance-hall tune, and you can sing along to it, but it's also got all these motifs, and that gives you the emotional depth."

Robert Wyatt, a pianist, educator and Smithsonian Institution lecturer who co-edited *The George Gershwin Reader*, says Gershwin "was incredibly proud of his work. He was proud of the music, of the orchestrations, the drama and that it really was an opera."

Initially, *Porgy and Bess* had only limited success, running 124 performances, a good run for an opera but not for Broadway, and Gershwin, his lyricist brother Ira and librettist DuBose Heyward lost their \$70,000 investment.

"When Gershwin died intestate in 1937, the executors assigned monetary values to his property," Wyatt says. "*Rhapsody in Blue* was valued at \$50,000. I think *An American in Paris* was \$15,000. But *Porgy and Bess* was just \$20, for the cost of the paper.

The opera is set in Charleston, S.C., in the poor, black wharf section of Catfish Row. Porgy, a cripple who rides in a cart pulled by a goat, falls in love with Bess, the companion of the powerful stevedore Crown (played by Phillip Boykin) who kills another man in a craps game and flees. Bess moves in with Porgy, only to be lured away by Crown during a picnic on a nearby island where the stevedore had been hiding.

After a powerful hurricane hits, Crown returns for a showdown. Porgy kills him and goes to jail, and Bess is encouraged by the drug dealer Sportin' Life to come with him to New York. When Porgy returns and learns that Bess has left, he summons his goat cart to go find her.

Whitehead, winner of three Carbonell awards and a fern specialist and Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden trustee, is in his second tour as Sportin' Life.

"I'm a song-and-dance man, and the role suits me very nicely," he says from a stop in Lafayette, La. "It's a fun role. I can just get out there and do what I do."

Although Sportin' Life has the great standout number *It Ain't Necessarily So*, the opera is not a series of solos.

"The show is pretty much an ensemble piece," Whitehead says. "We are all connected; everybody in Catfish Row is an integral part of the action. When Sportin' Life appears, there's always trouble; there's always a scheme. He's a sign that trouble's about to happen."

Gershwin famously spent part of the summer of 1934 on a fact-finding mission to South Carolina's Gullah communities on Folly, James and Sullivan islands, where he immersed

himself in the musical culture, church services in particular. The cast of *Porgy and Bess* sings in dialect, which stirred criticism from contemporary observers such as Duke Ellington, who lambasted the opera's "lampblack Negroisms."

"We all have our discussions about it, and we tend to look at the good and the bad." Whitehead says. "There are parallels with those problems today. But [the opera] has been an enormous gift to African-American singers -- besides, who wouldn't want to sing *Summertime* and *I Loves You Porgy*? These are songs to die for."

Capasso has a five-year agreement with the Gershwin estate to present *Porgy*.

"For me there's *Porgy*, and then there's everything else," he says. "I had thought that before, but now that I've produced it. I'm certain of it."

As director, Capasso hired Randolph-Wright, an African American who hails from Charleston. "He told me he would do it as long as there was no burlap," Capasso says, referring to the opening Saturday-night craps-game scene, which is often staged with actors dressed casually. Randolph-Wright contended that Saturdays are dress-up nights for Charleston's black community, and the characters would be wearing their finest, not rags.

The production tours with an 18-piece orchestra. Orchestra Miami musicians will join them to bring Gershwin's lush score to life.

"It's a great theater piece," Rinaldi says. "It packs a real wallop. The characters are a little bit cardboard, but they don't lack emotional depth. Porgy is a man, and Bess is a woman, who want to be loved and want to have a normal life. Like all great operas, it deals with the human condition."