

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 DAYTONA BEACH NEWS-JOURNAL

Daytona Beach, FL

March 12, 2010

Actress navigates racial fault lines of 'Porgy and Bess'

By Rick de Yampert, Entertainment Writer

Soprano Donita Volkwijn was only 5 years old when her family emigrated from Capetown, South Africa, to the United States.

Still, when she landed the role of Bess in the 75th anniversary tour of "Porgy and Bess," she recognized the tension between the white police detective and the poor black people depicted in George Gershwin's classic opera.



While she was a young child in Capetown, "it's not like my parents were front-page names," Volkwijn says during a phone interview from a tour stop in Fort Worth, Texas. The tour (with, pictured at right, Volkwijn as Bess and Leonard Rowe as Porgy) comes March 13 to the Mary McLeod Bethune Performing Arts Center in Daytona Beach.

"But my parents would have parties," Volkwijn says. "Not political meetings -- just parties at which there were white people, black people and colored people. Because of that they were watched by the secret police. Part of the reason we moved was because my parents were on the short list for probably being arrested."

"There are two scenes with a detective in our show. The relationship between this white detective and the black people is pretty indicative of how things were in apartheid as well."

Landing in America didn't mean Volkwijn was finished navigating racial fault lines. After earning her degree in vocal performance from the Conservatory of Music at Oberlin College, then her master's degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music, she began landing roles in regional productions of opera's titans: Mimi in Puccini's "La Boheme," Susanna in Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," Fiordiligi in Mozart's "Cosi Fan Tutte."

But, she discovered, "People are still uncomfortable with seeing different races onstage."

Has Volkwijn (below with Reggie Whitehead as Sportin' Life) directly encountered such prejudices while performing Mozart and the great European operas?



She pauses for what seems like an hour, emits a soft, carefree yet slightly sardonic laugh and says, "Ummm, yeeesssss."

She laughs again before adding: "I have to laugh really because life is just funny. In some instances I have been told that I'm not quote-unquote black enough to sing a role. In other instances, people have said to me, 'Oh, you're so ethnic looking.' And I'm like, OK I'm not going to get that role. That's code for 'We really don't know where to put you so we're going to go with our comfortable choice.'

"It's not only for black singers. I have a friend who's Asian who runs into similar problems."

"Porgy and Bess" isn't free from such racial entanglements. In fact, quite the opposite. Considered by many critics to be the greatest opera ever written by a native-born American, "Porgy and Bess" has conjured controversy since its debut in 1935.

The work features music by George Gershwin, libretto by novelist DuBose Heyward, and lyrics by Ira Gershwin and Heyward -- three white men.

The opera, set in the poor area of early 20th-century, segregated Charleston, S.C., tells the story of Porgy and his attempts to rescue Bess from her abusive lover, Crown, and the sly drug dealer Sportin' Life.

Critics have leveled charges against the opera on two fronts: that white artists have interpreted, or appropriated, black music and culture, and that the opera plays into stereotypes that African-American communities are mired in poverty, drugs and violence.

" 'Porgy and Bess' belongs in a museum and no self-respecting African American should want to see it, or be seen in it," said social critic Harold Cruse (as quoted by James Standifer in his essay "The Complicated Life of Porgy and Bess" on the Web site of the National Endowment For the Humanities). "It portrays the seamiest side of Negro life -- presumably the image of black people that white audiences want to see."

Harry Belafonte refused to star in the 1959 film version, and Sidney Poitier begrudgingly took the part only because he believed declining it might jeopardize his chances of landing other film roles.

Not all black people condemned the opera. According to Art Hilgart, writing on broadwayrevisited.com, Harlem renaissance composer J. Rosamond Johnson "called George Gershwin the Abraham Lincoln of music for bringing black music into the cultural mainstream."

"I think it is very easy to make caricatures of these people on the stage," Volkwijn says. "If the director or a company is lazy about it, it can very easily go into stereotypes. But if you listen to the music, there is a complexity there that I think speaks of any group of humanity.

"It is a slice of life, and I think this is a pretty accurate portrayal of these characters. If people choose to believe that these characters are representational of all black people, then that's on them. That's their issue.

"My answer to that also is: If you feel that strongly about black people only being represented in one way, write us another opera. How about that? Or how about colorblind casting for the big operas that are out there?"

Still, Volkwijn notes that she had reservations about taking on the role.

"It's a very complicated thing," she says. "There is a certain stigma attached in the operatic world that once you do a 'Porgy and Bess' show, you will never be cast as anything else but that role -- simply because then you are identified as a black singer, as opposed to just a singer. Luckily for me that has not been the case.

"I thought about it long and hard when I was offered the role. Then reality set in and I thought, 'So what if all you do for the rest of your life is sing Bess? You are creating something, you are singing which is what you love to do. So what's the issue?'

"So I accepted the role and have been very pleased ever since. First of all, the piece is written so beautifully. There are so many layers to the music that, at the end of each night, there's a sense of accomplishment and rediscovery. That is a very rewarding experience. You feel it with Puccini, you feel it with Mozart.

"For a while people would only hire me to do Mozart. That's just fine. You can't complain. This piece of music is the same way. You have an opportunity to bring these characters to life that we all know."

Performing as Bess has been a challenge "more from a dramatic standpoint," Volkwijn says. She notes that, oddly, Bess does not have an aria, although she "steals a snippet" of "Summertime" (the opera's signature song) from the Clara character.

"The challenge for me is that Bess interacts with people, especially with men, on a very sexual level," Volkwijn says. "That's how her identity is established. That's one of the beautiful things about her relationship with Porgy -- he doesn't want anything from her. He just offers her a safe haven.

"In that offering of a safe haven, she starts to discover what actual love is, not just using her body to survive. That's a bit of a challenge for me," Volkwijn says with a laugh.

If You Go

WHAT: "Porgy and Bess" 75th anniversary tour

WHEN: 8 p.m. March 13

WHERE: Mary McLeod Bethune Performing Arts Center, 698 W. International Speedway Blvd., Daytona Beach.

TICKETS: \$27-\$47 plus processing fee; students \$17 with ID. Available at culturefound.org, by calling 386-226-1927, or at News-Journal Center, 221 N. Beach St., Daytona Beach. Also available at the Bethune Center two hours prior show time.

Photos: Sarah Shatz