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### THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Charlotte, VA  
May 13, 2010

## For box office impact, 'Porgy' is best

**Gershwin's music and an enduring, diverse storyline are back for more as Opera Carolina caps its season.**

By Steven Brown

Take a guess. What set an all-time high at Opera Carolina's box office the last time the company produced it? "Carmen"? "La Boheme"? "Aida"?

The answer: none of the above. "Porgy and Bess" left them all behind. Those powerful, melodious love stories were eclipsed by the unlikely romance between a Charleston femme fatale and a man with crippled legs but an unbeatable spirit. That should tell you about the magnetism of George Gershwin's music.

Gershwin's tunes will ring out again this weekend, when Opera Carolina caps its season with a touring production of "Porgy." Gershwin's opera is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year.

"It crosses a lot of barriers," says James Meena, Opera Carolina's general director. Its musical roots stretch across opera, Broadway and jazz. Though it's set in an African-American neighborhood in Charleston, its romance and drama transcend racial boundaries. Young people can enjoy it, if they're ready for some of the darker forces that affect its characters.

"I've been calling it a PG-13 story," Meena says. For those of who haven't been following "Porgy" for 75 years, here's a refresher.

Improbable relationship? Like the love affair at its center, "Porgy and Bess" itself grew from chemistry between people you might not expect to click. Gershwin was a New Yorker, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants and the toast of Broadway and Hollywood. DuBose Heyward, whose novel "Porgy" supplied the story - and who collaborated on the opera - resided for his entire life in his native Charleston and the Carolinas, where his Southern-blueblood ancestry included a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

A third culture - African-American - brought them together. As a boy, Gershwin liked to roller-skate into Harlem, where he listened in on jazz bands. Heyward, going about his business in Charleston, regularly encountered a beggar named Sammy Smalls, who was nicknamed "Goat Sammy" because, unable to use his legs, he relied on a cart pulled by a goat.

Sammy became the inspiration for the fictional Porgy. Heyward transformed Cabbage Row, a tenement on Charleston's Church Street - the same street as his home - into the story's Catfish Row, the stomping grounds of Porgy and Bess. The driving rhythms and seductive harmonies of jazz gave Gershwin's music its spark.

So much for labels: While Gershwin thought of "Porgy" as an opera, resistance from the 1930s opera world - which, for one thing, wasn't ready for a largely African-American cast - forced him to premiere it on Broadway. Devotees can still get worked up about which category "Porgy" belongs to.

But audiences have responded (to borrow an unrelated Gershwin title): Who cares?

"Porgy" embraces Broadway's pizzazz as well as opera's grandeur. At one end of the spectrum, Porgy's "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" could fit into any toe-tapping Broadway show. At the other, the overlapping prayers in "Doctor Jesus" are as fervent as the grandest operatic outcries. And some of the most beloved numbers straddle musical worlds, combining jazz's seductiveness with opera's full-throatedness - as in the lullaby "Summertime" and the love duet "Bess, You Is My Woman Now."

The living isn't easy: The idyllic life described in "Summertime" when the curtain rises isn't what the people of Catfish Row experience as the story unfolds. They have to deal with violence, poverty and natural disaster. But they know how to celebrate life.

"They cry together. They laugh together. They pray together," Meena says. "They're a strong community of people. That's the uplifting and affirming part of the story."

When Opera Carolina did "Porgy" in 2004, Meena said, the sales reached 102 percent of capacity - thanks to the resale tickets turned in by subscribers who couldn't use them. Even if that doesn't happen again, Meena says, "Porgy" should enable Opera Carolina to end its season with a weekend of sizable and diverse audiences.

"It's just the kind of boost we need going into the summer," Meena says. "A big, popular show."