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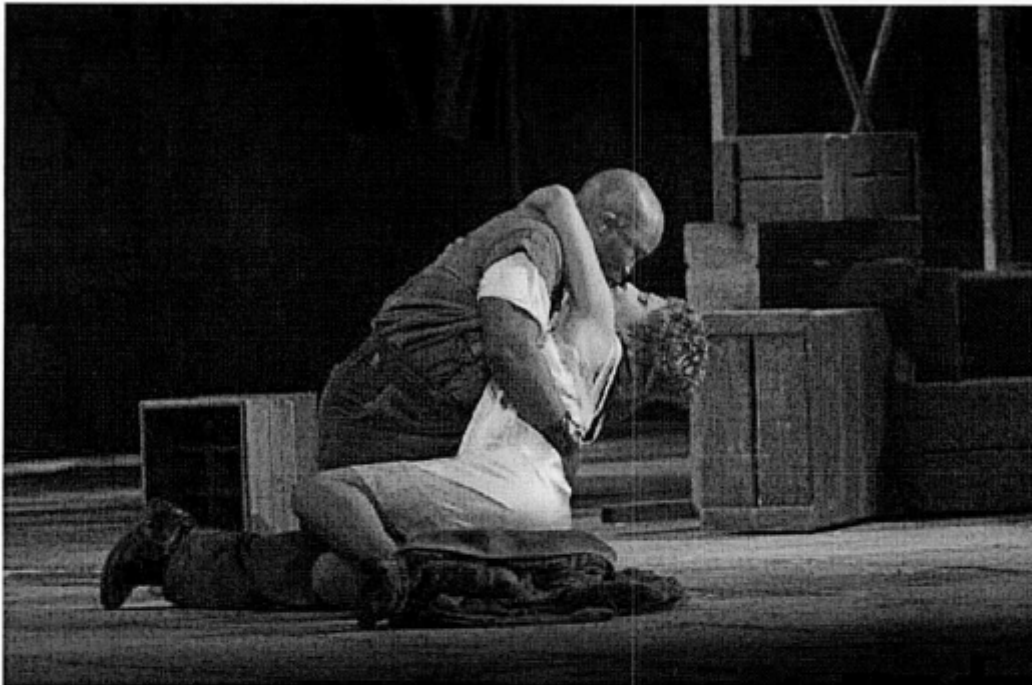
EU JACKSONVILLE

Jacksonville, FL

March 16, 2010

PORGY AND BESS theatre review

UNF Fine Arts Presentation



by DON WESTWOOD

In a coup de theatre, the UNF Fine Arts Center beat out Jacksonville's other theatre groups to present the 75th Anniversary production of the Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*, currently on tour nationally. The performance took place in the 1,300-seat Lazzara Performance Hall on Friday, March 12 (7:30 PM). Michael Capasso's spectacular New York production had the audience fully engaged throughout. The evening ended with a whooping Jacksonville-style standing ovation.

We often speak of "catalog" musicals – shows with numerous songs that have become popular apart from the shows in which they appear. *Porgy and Bess* is a "catalog" opera/musical, a hybrid piece with both operatic and popular-style songs and musical numbers. Songs such as "Summertime" and "My Man's Gone Now," along with duets such as "Bess, You is My Woman Now," require an abundance of operatic vocal technique, while "A Woman is a Sometime Thing" and "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'," among others, call for strong-voiced popular vocalism. Happily, the cast of this production meet all vocal requirements, and that's just for openers.

All principal roles and ensemble have been cast to perfection. From the moment the curtain opens on John Farrell's highly stylized stage setting, we believe we have been transported to 1930s Charleston, SC. The citizens of Catfish Row spring into action with complete credibility, supported by a fine orchestra under the direction of Music Director Pacien Mazzagatti. Sequina Dubose (Clara) sings the beautiful lullaby "Summertime" with pure velvet tone, in sharp contrast to the drama of drunkenness, drug peddling, seduction and murder that is about to unfold.

Highlights of Act I – there are many – feature Eric McKeever (Jake), Reyna Carguill (Serena), Patrick Blackwell (Porgy), Kishna Davis (Bess), and Reggie Whitehead (Sportin' Life). Of particular note is Ms. Carguill's astonishingly compelling performance of "My Man's Gone Now" at the funeral of her murdered husband. The character of Porgy is instantly established by Patrick Blackwell's rolling bass-baritone and dignified dramatic presence. Likewise, from the moment of her entrance with her husband, the dangerous Crown (Phillip Boykin), Ms. Davis reveals a complete portrait of Bess – earthy, sensuous, frightened, confused – enhanced by her lush soprano. Reggie Whitehead's Sportin' Life rarely stops slithering, and his Act I favorite, "It Ain't Necessarily So," pays off with the desired toe-tapping effect.

Act II delivers similar rewards. Among the supporting characters, Mari-Yan Pringle (Strawberry Woman) and Sean T. Miller (Crab Man) stand out in brief but significant opportunities, creating sultry atmosphere and comic relief respectively. Throughout the performance, the ensemble company excels in such numbers as "Gone, Gone, Gone," "Oh I Can't Sit Down," and Crown's "A Red-Headed Woman." Speaking of Crown, Phillip Boykin's performance is nothing less than over-the-top amazing – the embodiment of uncontrolled drunken brutality. He's such an awful human being that we want to stand up and cheer when Porgy kills him. We feel guiltless satisfaction when Porgy gets away with it.

Porgy and Bess is an artifact – a complex classic frozen in the 1930s. George Gershwin's challenging musical score is very much a product of its own time. The story is by no means a stroll in the park. This production, forcefully directed by Charles Randolph-Wright, makes no apology for content and no attempt to lessen the bite of the story's more sordid elements. Therein lays one of the production's main strengths: specificity. Taking an honest look at a group of people imbedded in a specific social matrix allows us to identify with one or more of the characters. Specificity is a route to universality, the cornerstone of successful theatre.

As so meaningfully expressed in this production, we earnestly want the crippled Porgy to triumph. (His handicap is both physical and symbolic of challenges generally.) We want Bess to be saved from the evil of Sportin' Life's narcotics. We know that Porgy does triumph in one way, that of strong character. His loyalty to Bess continues despite her drug-induced departure for New York with Sportin' Life. We don't learn whether or not Porgy finds and saves his "Bessy." We hope he does as we fight off the inescapable tear in the eye as Porgy forces his body to leave the familiar life of Catfish Row to begin a difficult journey.

The journey of this 75th Anniversary production deserves to be one full of public welcome and critical praise. Following performances in Daytona, Miami, and Sarasota, *Porgy and Bess* moves on to other locales.