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Countering a quarter-century of controversy

A new touring production of *Porgy and Bess* tries to lay to rest claims that the work merely perpetuates stereotypes

By Richard Ades

When *Porgy and Bess* opens at the Southern Theatre on Friday, “I just hope people come with an open mind,” said Eric McKeever.

The Columbus resident and Ohio State grad plays Jake, a fisherman, in the opera, which has been controversial since it first opened 75 years ago.

Set in Catfish Row, a poor black community in Charleston, S.C., *Porgy and Bess* is the story of a crippled beggar who’s hopelessly in love with a prostitute. Innovatively combining classical orchestration with blues and jazz, it’s given the world such beloved standards as “Summertime” and “It Ain’t Necessarily So.”

But the tale also is filled with lust, drugs and violence, which leaves it open to charges that it perpetuates negative African-American stereotypes.

Exacerbating the controversy is the fact that all of its creators—composer George Gershwin, lyricist Ira Gershwin and lyricist/librettist DuBose Heyward, who wrote the original novel—were white. Indeed, some early critics saw it as little more than a minstrel show that reflected white attitudes toward black Americans.

“The times are here to debunk Gershwin’s lampblack Negroisms,” Duke Ellington complained following its premiere.

Controversy over the opera reached new heights during the civil rights struggles of the mid-20th century. Even today, said Charles Randolph-Wright, director of the new touring production that’s coming to Columbus following its premiere tonight in Van Wert, some African-Americans remain skeptical.

“Given that *Porgy and Bess* perpetuates in the minds of many people stereotypes of the prostitute, the drug dealer, the cripple, I think a lot of African-American people have not...responded to this piece over the years,” he said.

In light of such feelings, Randolph-Wright said organizers of the touring show approached him about directing it not only because they knew of his professional background as a playwright and a director, but because they “were very interested in someone of color directing the piece.”

And Randolph-Wright had an additional job qualification that made him especially sensitive to the subject matter: “I’m from



The director didn’t want them to dress in the usual burlap and rags: Donita Volkwijn and Leonard Rowe as the title characters in *Porgy and Bess* (photo by Sarah Shatz)

South Carolina,” he said. “I have relatives in Charleston.”

CAPA and the King Arts Complex will present *Porgy and Bess* at 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday (Feb. 19-21) at the Southern Theatre, 21 E. Main St. Tickets are \$35-\$65. 614-469-0939, 1-800-745-3000 or ticketmaster.com.

So how does this black Carolinian propose to counter suspicions that *Porgy and Bess* reflects white prejudice rather than black reality?

“For me, it’s just to allow people to have dignity,” he said, explaining that he’s encouraged his actors to portray *Porgy*, *Bess* and the other residents of Catfish Row as individuals rather than types.

“You understand these people as opposed to making them just one-note—that’s the prostitute, that’s the drug dealer, that’s the bad guy,” he said. “The bad guy may actually have these other feelings.”

On an even more obvious level, Randolph-Wright said he’s made sure the characters dress in a way that reflects their pride rather than in the rags and burlap they wear in some productions.

“One thing I specifically know, especially having grown up (in South Carolina), is how people dress and how they take pride in how they look,” he said. Randolph-Wright added that he gave the show’s costume designer photos of his own family from the 1930s so she could dress the characters accordingly.

To Randolph-Wright, the real problem is not that *Porgy and Bess*’s portrayal of a poor black community is false—the problem is that it’s not balanced by other operas about blacks who aren’t living in the midst of poverty and crime.

“Name me another opera with black characters in it. Margaret Garner comes to mind, (*The Life and Times of*) *Malcolm X*,” he said. “It’s one of the few operas in which you will see black characters who are written as black characters.”

McKeever, who is appearing in his first *Porgy and Bess*, said he hopes viewers see that Heyward and the Gershwins “really tried to capture a slice of life in a specific time, which was the 1930s, that showed a variety of types of people.”

That variety includes not only a beggar, a prostitute and a drug dealer, but his own character, an upstanding fisherman named Jake, and his wife, Clara.

“They...certainly have a very healthy, loving relationship and are very supportive of each other and of the community,” McKeever said.

“I think when people see the show, they’ll see everything from the dope peddler to the very spiritual (person) to the person that’s struggling for redemption,” he said.

McKeever added that, though it’s set in a specific environment, *Porgy and Bess* deals with universal emotions and needs such as love, lust, greed, redemption and forgiveness. Once viewers understand that, he said, “they’ll all relate to it.”



His first *Porgy and Bess*: OSU grad Eric McKeever plays Jake, a fisherman, in the touring show (photo by Sarah Shatz)