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COLUMBUS DISPATCH

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Updated tour warms up to old favorite

By Michael Grossberg

This year, *Summertime* will arrive during winter.

Porgy and Bess, a warm and tuneful piece of seasonal counterprogramming, will open Friday for a weekend run in the Southern Theatre.

The Columbus Association for the Performing Arts is being joined by the King Arts Complex in offering the work.

CAPA, which in 2004 presented the classic folk opera by George and Ira Gershwin in the same theater, is sharing it again as part of a 75th-anniversary tour.

"It's possibly the greatest American opera and something that hasn't toured with a new production in the United States for quite some time," said veteran producer Michael Capasso, general director of Dicapo Opera Theatre in New York.

Assembled in New York, the 25-city touring show boasts a 30-member cast and an 18-person orchestra; new sets, costumes and lighting; and a new orchestration developed for the tour with the blessing of the Gershwin estate.

"*Porgy and Bess* absolutely is a grand opera that requires the size of a Broadway national tour and vocal ability equal to or greater than many of the grand operas," Capasso said. "It's an American classic, in a compelling and passionate staging, that contains some of the greatest American music ever written and with some extraordinarily beautiful voices in the cast."

With songs such as *Summertime*, *It Ain't Necessarily So* and *I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'*, the opera weaves a tragic tale of love, prejudice and poverty among black Americans in the 1920s.

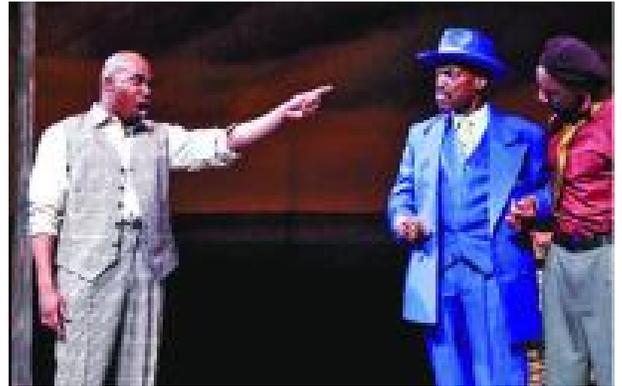
"What makes it endure is the amazing score," said Columbus native Eric McKeever, who plays Jake.

The graduate of Ohio State University has appeared in *Anna Bolena*, *Faust*, *Tosca* and *Turandot* with Opera Columbus; and as Jim in *Huck Finn's American Song* with the Phoenix Theatre for Children.

The former Opera Columbus education director left his day job for a return to the stage.

"I decided to go back into singing," said McKeever, 39.

Among other numbers, the baritone sings *A Woman Is a Sometime Thing*.



Jake (Columbus native Eric McKeever), left, in the national tour of *Porgy and Bess* (Photo by Sarah Shatz)

Clara, his character's wife, performs *Summertime*.

"The score is an incredible hybrid of cultures and Gershwin's knowledge of different traditions -- American, European, African," McKeever said. "At times it sounds like Scott Joplin; at times, like Wagner."

On his first national tour, McKeever has joined a diverse group of performers: Some were trained in musical theater; and others, in opera.

"The opera singers have learned a lot about dance and movement and creating a character," he said, "and the musical-theater singers have learned a lot about the operatic singing and tradition."

First presented in 1935 as a boundary-breaking blend of opera, blues, jazz and musical theater, *Porgy and Bess* was adapted by the Gershwins and author DuBose Heyward from his novel *Porgy* and the play he co-wrote with wife Dorothy.

The setting, the fictional Catfish Row, was based on the real-life Cabbage Row in Charleston, S.C.

"The story is very dramatic; . . . the music is extraordinary," Capasso said. "Gershwin, a great composer, in many ways reinvented a genre."

"It's American *verismo* (a realistic early-1900s style of Italian opera), dealing with the day-to-day life, jealousies and violence of people in the black community in Charleston."

The producer chose Charles Randolph Wright, a theater director from Charleston, to stage the revival.

"Wright has a feeling for how this community lived," Capasso said, "with hardworking people struggling to raise a family."

Through the years, the piece has sparked controversies and mixed feelings, especially among blacks, because of concerns about characterizations that reinforce stereotypes.

"The story is about people killing each other over money and women," he said, "but that happens all the time -- not just in the black community."

The production uses the costumes to challenge, in subtle ways, stereotypes of class and race.

"You see the people at play and leisure," Capasso said, "so the look of the clothes will be nicer than people typically see. . . . It's not burlap and torn shirts."

"Some costumes may be older, perhaps frayed and faded, but they've been mended. They give themselves some dignity."

McKeever agreed: "Yes, the people are poor, but they're proud."