

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

NIA ONLINE

Niaonline.com

March 19, 2010

75th ANNIVERSARY PRODUCTION OF "PORGY AND BESS" ON TOUR



By Karyn D. Collins

A new, 75th Anniversary touring production of George Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess" is making its way around the country, bringing what those behind the scenes hope will be seen as a fresh approach to the opera.

The new "Porgy and Bess," is being produced by Michael Capasso and is directed by Charles Randolph-Wright ("Mama I Want To Sing"), with music direction and new orchestration by Pacien Mazzagatti.

"I can't rewrite the opera but I can change the approach from what I've seen in the past. And one of the things I tried to do is to imbue this world with some dignity," Randolph-Wright said.

Most fans agree the brilliance of "Porgy and Bess" can be found in its score by George and Ira Gershwin.

The opera, which has traditionally featured an all African American cast, is set in Catfish Row, in the slums of Charleston, South Carolina. There, Porgy, a disabled man tries in vain to rescue Bess who is not only trapped in an abusive relationship with her lover, Crown, but under the control of the drug dealer, Sportin' Life.

The score's memorable songs include "Summertime," "It Ain't Necessarily So," "Bess, You Is My Woman Now" and "I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'."

But its libretto by DuBose Heyward, though heart wrenching, has, historically, been a source of criticism for its portrayals of African Americans.

Randolph-Wright said he too had always been troubled by the portrayals in "Porgy and Bess."

“The problem is there’s no balance. People say, well there are prostitutes in other operas, but it seems like the characters here are ones we as black people always seem to play,” he said.

Randolph-Wright said he approached the material with the thought of bringing more balance and a sense of self-respect to the portrayals. Among other things he insisted that the characters not wear the burlap and rags as with most productions of “Porgy and Bess.” He said he also tried to take a fresh approach to the characters.

“Porgy doesn’t have to be pathetic. Why can’t he be elegant?” Randolph-Wright said.

Donita Volkwijn, one of the two women sharing the role of Bess for this tour, said she thinks today’s audiences are ready to understand and appreciate “Porgy and Bess” for what it is.

“I think just like with any opera, any piece of art, any piece of drama, it’s a slice of life,” Volkwijn said. “This doesn’t represent all of the people of that time. But it was some of the people. There were people living in the slums. There were actual people these characters were based on.”

Volkwijn said she also hopes that audiences can appreciate “Porgy and Bess” from a more practical sense: the opera has provided opportunities for generations of black performers.

“For those times between when we’re singing Mozart and Puccini, it helps us financially, too” she said. “It really is an amazing work. The audience response so far has been incredible. I think people are ready to appreciate ‘Porgy and Bess’ for what it is.”