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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Columbus, OH

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Review | Porgy and Bess

Strong ensemble overcomes pace

By Barbara Zuck

For many operas, the talent requirements are surprisingly minimal. Put together a beautiful soprano and a good tenor, and you're halfway home.

Not so with the great 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*. This is a true ensemble piece from every standpoint. Each cast member has to be able to act and sing -- in the latter case, in that most treacherous of languages for singers, American.

Happily, the current touring production of George and Ira Gershwin's operatic masterpiece -- which opened last night at the Southern Theatre -- boasts a cast remarkable in both depth and uniformity. It's difficult to find a weak link in this group, which brings this tragic story and immortal score to vivid life. The production was specially created to honor the opera's 75th anniversary and is presented by the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts.

Patrick Blackwell as the noble, disabled Porgy and Kishna Davis as the beautiful but weak-willed Bess create wholly believable, sympathetic characters. You want them to get together, you want their story to end happily -- all the while knowing, of course, that it won't.

Reggie Whitehead as Sportin' Life is a terrific actor who made the serpent with the "apple" very appealing. As the other Bad Guy, Crown, Phillip Boykin came across as both masculine and appropriately possessive. Columbus' own Eric McKeever made a strong impression as Jake.

Sequina DuBose as Clara and Reyna Carguill as Serena have two of the opera's greatest arias: *Summertime* and *My Man's Gone Now*. Each singer found the momentary emotional power and depth that was too often lacking elsewhere in the production.

Direction by Charles Randolph-Wright emphasized clarity and efficiency, admirable qualities with a large cast, a small stage and a hefty score. The chief disappointment last night was the fast-paced, inflexible musical direction.

Admittedly, this opera is long, but conductor Pacien Mazzagatti sped through it like a Maserati -- with no pit stops. Congrats to the cast for being able to perform so well under unforgiving direction.