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THE VAN WERT INDEPENDENT

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Porgy & Bess premiere breathtaking

By DAVE MOSIER

Broadway came to the Niswonger Performing Arts Center of Northwest Ohio in the form of the musical *Annie* and was a rousing success. However, that was nothing to the roars of approval opera received Thursday night when the 75th anniversary tour of *Porgy & Bess* premiered at the NPAC.

Porgy & Bess, the great American folk opera composed by George Gershwin, with libretto by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward and additional lyrics by Gershwin's brother, Ira, received a tremendous response from those who attended Thursday night's premiere performance.

The opera, which chronicles the lives of the inhabitants of Catfish Row, a fictitious waterside slum area of Charleston, S.C., and the up-and-down love story between Porgy, a crippled beggar, and "fallen woman" Bess, was magnificently produced by Michael Capasso and directed by Charles Randolph-Wright.

If Thursday's premiere of the opera is any indication, the show should be a success as it continues its multi-city tour in the United States with performances in Columbus this weekend.

The story is typical opera, filled with tragedy and pathos, with touches of humor and lots of emotion. The singing and acting were excellent, with a particularly strong ensemble of singers handling the nearly Wagnerian focus Gershwin placed on individual voices in the opera.

Porgy & Bess opens on Catfish Row as Clara tries to sooth her baby to sleep with the lullaby, "Summertime," and the men are involved in a crap shoot that ends in the death of one player, Robbins, by a brutish stevedore named Crown.

After killing Robbins, Crown flees, leaving his woman, Bess, to fend for herself. But the doors on Catfish Row are closed to the scarlet woman – all except that of crippled Porgy, who takes her in and makes her his woman.

After Crown forces Bess into a sexual liaison during a beach party that Porgy can't attend because of his crippled legs, the tension rises and crescendos to a climax following a storm that has Catfish Row inhabitants cowering in the room of Serena, Robbins' widow. When Crown sneaks back to take Bess away with him, Porgy is ready and kills the bully with his cane.

Although the law takes Porgy away for questioning about the deaths of Robbins and Crown, he returns triumphantly back to Catfish Row with money in his pocket from a craps game played with other jail inmates.

Just when all seems ready for a happy conclusion, Porgy finds Sportin' Life has lured Bess away to New York City with his Happy Dust. Devastated, Porgy nevertheless pulls himself up – mentally and physically – and the opera ends as he walks into the sunset to seek the love of his life.

The title characters were well-acted and sung by Leonard Rowe and Donita Volkwijn, who brought Porgy and Bess to scintillating life with their onstage presence and great voices. Reggie Whitehead was superb as Sportin' Life, a character created by Gershwin



Drug dealer Sportin' Life (in purple) offers Crown (left) some Happy Dust, while Porgy (seated, right) watches a crap game on the streets of Catfish Row during Thursday's production of Gershwin's opera, *Porgy & Bess* (Photo by Dave Mosier)

with Cab Calloway in mind. Whitehead not only handled the singing duties of the role, but lit up the stage with his physical presence, as he danced, strutted and slithered his way through the production.

Sequina DuBose, as Clara, did an excellent job on the plaintive “Summertime,” but Reyna Carguill, as Serena, blew the house away with her powerful and expressive voice. Her rendition of “My Man’s Gone Now” was the hit of an evening filled with wonderful songs, including Porgy’s “I Got Plenty of Nuttin” and “Bess, You is My Woman Now,” and Sportin’ Life’s “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” a cynical look at the Bible.

The 18-piece orchestra, conducted by Music Director Pacien Mazzagatti, provided the musical underpinning for the entire production, while the sets and costumes perfectly set the tone for the opera’s action.

Whether opera returns to the cornfields of Van Wert County remains to be seen, but, if it does, Porgy & Bess has set the bar high for any future productions. Bravissimo!



Life in Catfish Row, as portrayed in *Porgy & Bess*, is varied and colorful (photo by Dave Mosier)