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After 75 years, 'Porgy and Bess' has outlived the dispute over its artistic merits

By ROBERT TRUSSELL

There used to be a debate about whether "Porgy and Bess" was a musical or an opera.

Recently I listened to highlights from the 1976 Houston Grand Opera production, and all I can say is what I heard was opera. Yes, George Gershwin's familiar melodies soared, but the voices could clearly interpret Verdi and Puccini as adeptly as Gershwin.



Critics were divided when the epic depiction of African-American life in Charleston, S.C., premiered on Broadway in 1935. It was billed as a "folk opera," apparently to acknowledge Gershwin's use of jazz and gospel idioms and the fact that the score included songs that could be performed independently of the entire work.

"I am not ashamed of writing songs at any time so long as they are good songs," Gershwin wrote in his defense. "In 'Porgy and Bess' I was writing an opera for the theater, and without songs it could neither be of the theater nor entertaining from my viewpoint. But songs are entirely within the opera tradition. ... Nearly all of Verdi's operas contain what are known as 'song' hits."

Michael Capasso, a New York producer bringing a production of "Porgy and Bess" to the area next weekend, knows all of this and clearly stands on the side of opera.

"I've always wanted to do 'Porgy and Bess,'" Capasso, managing director of the Dicapo Opera Theatre, said recently. "I believe it is the great American opera. It's a spectacular piece of music."

The Dicapo company's national tour marks the 75th anniversary of "Porgy" and will play Friday and Saturday in Yardley Hall at Johnson County Community College.

The legitimacy of "Porgy and Bess" as a true opera was settled when the Houston Grand Opera performed the work in its entirety 34 years ago. The production restored material that had been excised to accommodate a relatively small Broadway pit orchestra and the extraordinary vocal demands on singers who had to perform eight times a week.

It was a vindication for Gershwin, who died (in 1937, only 38 years old) believing the work to be a failure. But from the beginning it was a piece that had to fight for respect. Although Gershwin had hoped to stage the world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, it opened on Broadway instead. And Broadway, of course, is no place for “real opera.”

Indeed, some critics judged the show guilty of a number of sins.

For one thing, it had those instantly memorable songs (“Summertime,” “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’”), several of which became pop standards. It also was tainted by the credentials of Gershwin and his brother, lyricist Ira Gershwin, who wrote for Broadway revues, the movies and Tin Pan Alley.

And it was based on a best-selling novel, “Porgy,” by DuBose Heyward, a white writer who in his book depicted an African-American subculture in Charleston. Heyward ultimately wrote the libretto and some of the lyrics for the Gershwin show.

So you can understand why some critics would view the piece askance. It was all so pop-culturish. It used folk idioms. It used jazz. It used dialect and slang. It wasn’t in German or Italian.

“To call it anything other than an opera is really kind of silly,” Capasso said. “Gershwin had never written for the operatic stage, he was a man of the theater ... and I think people were not sure what to make of it at first. It was this enormous piece with an all-black cast and elements of jazz. But I’ve got to tell you, this is an opera that requires operatic singers. It’s not an easy night at the theater (for the performers).”

Capasso plans for “Porgy” to tour off and on for 10 weeks in the U.S. Then he intends to take it to Mexico, Europe and Israel. He said he has a five-year agreement with the Gershwin estate.

Almost exactly 67 years ago “Porgy and Bess” was seen on a local stage for the first time when the national tour of the 1942 Broadway revival played the Music Hall. A fair number of singers in that show had performed in the world premiere in New York, including Todd Duncan, the original Porgy. Etta Moten, who had spent her adolescence and young adulthood in Kansas City, played Bess.

“The three acts and nine scenes are played in a manner parallel to that of grand opera, despite the fact that they contain repeated moments of genuine fun,” wrote an anonymous critic for The Kansas City Times.

The reviewer’s implication was clear: “Serious” opera isn’t particularly enjoyable, while “Porgy,” with its earthiness and memorable tunes, is an entertaining night at the theater.

The Dicapo company was founded in 1981 and had no permanent home for 10 years. Eventually it found one — a 200-seat theater on the Upper East Side of Manhattan where audiences can experience opera in an uncommonly intimate setting. But “Porgy” will not be seen there.

“The production is of a size that it wouldn’t fit into my theater in New York,” Capasso said. “Our back row is closer to the stage than the first row of the Metropolitan Opera, which I guess says something about the size of the Metropolitan Opera’s orchestra pit.”

The narrative of “Porgy and Bess” is in the tradition of many of the great European operas — a tormented love story replete with betrayal, violence, unrequited longing and tragedy. It depicts gamblers, fishermen and women under the influence of brutish men.

Porgy cannot use his legs and is transported in a cart tethered to a goat, and Bess, whom he loves, has been the woman of a murderous gambler named Crown.

The super-heated emotions exhibited by these impoverished, uneducated African-American characters still divide opinions about the show's sociological accuracy or lack thereof. Many black singers have refused to perform the piece. Harry Belafonte famously turned down the role of Porgy in Otto Preminger's film version.

But for operatically trained singers — including the great soprano Leontyne Price, who played Bess in a 1952 revival and appeared in the show on tour in Kansas City — Gershwin's opera was an important career-building step during the era of segregation.

"It's definitely a split opinion, although hopefully our production is going to change that a little bit," Capasso said. "I know a couple of prominent African-American singers who have throughout their careers refused to do Porgy. But it has given enormous opportunities to classically trained African-American singers to hone their craft. It's something that African-American singers take pride in or they don't."

Capasso conceded that past productions of "Porgy and Bess" may have projected stereotypes that reflected white "perceptions of what the black community was like."

But the tour's director, Charles Randolph Wright, is a stage-television-film veteran who is African-American and a native of South Carolina. Wright, Capasso suggested, will bring a unique level of authenticity to the show.

The world of "Porgy and Bess," Capasso said, is like the broader world, full of villains and victims and heroic figures, and is in keeping with the stories told in great European operas.

"I think it is a great piece of music," he said. "And if you're a singer you bring what you have to it. Not all people in opera are portrayed accurately or in a favorable light. I don't think it's demeaning for a black person to be in this piece. If they're a classically trained singer they're going to succeed if they do this piece. It's not just black society that has these people. Look at all opera — if you're Spanish should you never sing Carmen because she was a slut?"