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THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Cincinnati, OH

February 21, 2010

'Porgy and Bess' at Aronoff

BY JACKIE DEMALINE • FEBRUARY 21, 2010

Charles Randolph-Wright directs, writes and produces for theater, television and film. Area audiences know him for his play "Blue," which was produced at Playhouse in the Park.

Randolph-Wright's first foray into opera is the 75th anniversary production of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," which plays at 8 p.m. Wednesday at the Aronoff Center.

Porgy, a disabled and downtrodden but generous beggar, haunts the streets known as "Catfish Row," a poor district of early 20th century segregated Charleston, S.C. He's in love with the prostitute Bess (Donita Volkwijn), who has a roguish new suitor and a violent ex-lover.

"I'm a black man from South Carolina," says Randolph-Wright. He felt tugged by the history and in taking on the assignment, he decided, "I want this to reflect the people I know."

Randolph-Wright did research at a Charleston historical museum where his cousin is an archivist; he gave designers photos of his family from the 1930s to anchor the opera in reality ("black people always dress"); he read the source material to better define characters.

Looking at the 1935 original through a 2010 lens, Randolph-Wright says he wanted to assure that these characters have dignity. "There's no changing its world. I want to honor it."

Randolph-Wright found himself reaching beyond the dazzling score - possibly the first "pop" opera, "Porgy & Bess" has break-out standards such as "Summertime," which, Randolph-Wright points out, are still being covered today by artists including Beyonce.

"Who was Bess before she was in an abusive relationship? Who is Porgy and why does he do what he does? I wanted to give the characters more (dramatic) arcs."

Porgy is Leonard Rowe, who sang the role of Robert Garner with the New York City Opera in Richard Danielpour and Toni Morrison's "Margaret Garner." Soprano Volkwijn, a native of Cape Town, South Africa, is a graduate of Oberlin College and the Cleveland Institute of Music.