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### *Simply the Bess*

#### **Local audiences get a chance to see a more PC version of 'Porgy and Bess'**

By Anne Arenstein

George Gershwin had high hopes for his first opera, a setting of DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy*. "If I am successful," he wrote, "it will resemble a combination of the drama and romance of *Carmen* and the beauty of *Meistersinger*, if you can imagine that."

Seventy five years after its premiere, *Porgy and Bess* exceeds Gershwin's most outsized expectations. Produced all over the world, from the Metropolitan Opera to that operatic holy of holies, La Scala in Milan, the opera has become an American icon, the source of now classic standards "Summertime," "I Got Plenty of Nothin'" and "It Ain't Necessarily So."

The 75th anniversary touring company comes to Cincinnati for one night with a production approved by the Gershwin estate and overseen by Michael Capasso, general director of New York's Dicapo Opera Theatre. The cast of 25 singers and a live orchestra are led by Pacien Mazzagatti, who also created new orchestrations for the production.

Set in the vibrant black working class neighborhood of Catfish Row in Charleston, S.C., the story of the crippled beggar Porgy and his love for good-time girl Bess plays out against the realities of a tightly-knit community, segregation, violence and drugs.

Gershwin was fascinated by the complexities and sonic richness of African American music, spending evenings in Harlem Jazz clubs and befriending its musicians. Preparing for *Porgy and Bess*, he spent a month on Folly Island in South Carolina, absorbing the music of the streets, the churches and the honky tonks. The score, for which he did all the orchestrations, captures passion, violence and the rituals of the community, from a haunting wake to an exuberant picnic celebration.

Many in the African American community are less enthusiastic about what's seen as cultural appropriation and yet another example of racial stereotyping. Director Charles Randolph Wright (*Preaching to the Choir, Mama I Want to Sing*) addresses the controversy with a staging that sees the action from "the perspective of the black experience," according to blogger Big CED.

In addition to fleshing out characterizations, Wright sought to correct the way the entire community was costumed. A native of South Carolina, he feels a strong connection to Gershwin's work, saying: "I am descended from the types of people portrayed in this opera."

After searching through family photos and archives from the turn of the century, Wright saw that great pride was taken in personal appearance, no matter how poor the family.

That sense of pride extends to the community of Catfish Row, where the occupations are described in song: fisherman, undertaker, sellers of strawberries, honey and crabs. Wright says that his staging "builds up the community, giving everyone the opportunity to experience the passion, perseverance and originality in the lives of these people."

While Gershwin wasn't a social activist, he never sought to perpetuate stereotypes. He insisted on hiring African American artists, going against the convention of using white singers in blackface. And he supported his cast when

they refused to perform at the segregated National Theater in Washington, D.C., because friends and family would not be able to see them perform (the management eventually conceded to the cast's demands).

As one critic writes, Gershwin should be viewed as “a child of his time,” much like Georges Bizet, the Frenchman responsible for that most Spanish of operas, *Carmen*.

The late William Warfield, one of the leading interpreters of *Porgy* in the 1950s and '60s, never saw the work as a social commentary. He acknowledged that today's audiences “see the work in a different way. But to me, *Porgy* is a good and beautiful story. You don't see it and say ‘this is wrong’ or ‘this is right.’ You are touched by the tale of a cripple who falls in love with a wayward woman and tries to save her with his love.”

And there's that music — that amazing, captivating, heartbreaking music.