

HEMSING ASSOCIATES

401 East 80th Street, Suite 14H
New York, NY 10075-0650
Tel.: 212/772-1132
Fax: 212/628-4255
E-mail: jhemsing@hemsingpr.com

THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte, NC
April 22, 2010

Homecoming with Porgy, Bess

by Ryanne Persinger



PHOTO/SARAH SHATZ

The cast of "Porgy and Bess." The production makes its way to Charlotte May 14-16 at the Belk Theater. This year marks the 75th anniversary of George Gershwin's enduring masterpiece.

Charles Randolph-Wright has a personal connection with the Carolinas.

You may remember him as the playwright of "Blue," which was performed at the Actor's Theatre of Charlotte in 2009 and set in South Carolina.

Or maybe as the director of the television series "Lincoln Heights" on ABC Family. Maybe you associate him with the performance of "Sophisticated Ladies," or his work with Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C.

Born in York, S.C., and a graduate of Duke University, Randolph-Wright is returning home as the director of one of the best-known black opera performances, "Porgy and Bess." The play is centered in the fictional Catfish Row or (Cabbage Row) in Charleston, S.C. in the early 1900s.

When Randolph-Wright was approached about leading the show, he took on the responsibility acknowledging that the show had to be well received in the black community.

“The music is glorious and it has been a success for many, many years,” Randolph-Wright said. “But what concerned me, especially being a black man from South Carolina, was how the characters were depicted. People assumed they dressed in rags then, but I had images of my family in mind who were laborers who were always dressed nice.”

Randolph-Wright has a cousin who is an archivist at a Charleston museum where he researched the way life was for African Americans back then.

“I wanted to celebrate (blacks) because this is a certain part of our history,” Randolph-Wright said. “These are our ancestors; people from South Carolina.”

The costumes were changed to reflect how African Americans took pride in the way they dressed.

“How you looked, along with your appearance, was your dignity,” he said. “You may not have had a lot of money or lived in a big house, but you did have your dignity.”

Written by George Gershwin, the play tells the story of a crippled black man named Porgy and his attempts to rescue Bess from her violent lover named Crown.

Randolph-Wright says he doesn't look at the character of Porgy as pitiful, however he does have pity on him.

“I'm really passionate about what this is,” he said. “This is an era that (blacks) don't want to hear about and see....the '20s, '30s, '40s and '50s. Despite the degradation, we still had joy.”

In honor of the play's 75th anniversary, the production is on tour and will be stopping in Charlotte May 14-16 at the Belk Theater, 130 N. Tryon St.

“I'm thrilled to be able to come home and do the show,” Randolph-Wright said. “We get to rehearse in Charlotte. For me, it's really exciting.”

Famous black actresses and actors associated with the opera included Dorothy Dandridge, Cab Calloway, Miles Davis, Sidney Poitier and Sammy Davis Jr.

Some of the music includes: “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” “I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'”, and “Summertime.”

“It has some of the most glorious music I've ever heard,” Randolph-Wright said. “The score is so very beautiful. It's moving, fun and exciting.”

The cast also includes some Carolinians, whom Randolph-Wright says are exceptionally gifted.

“The voices are really impressive and are truly extraordinary,” Randolph-Wright said. “It's a very, very difficult score to sing but every single person on stage is incredible.”

Randolph-Wright says if you've never seen the production, now is the time.

“The people of York, Rock Hill and Charlotte have always supported me,” he added. “Opera is something I've always wanted to do and it's exciting that I get to come home and do it.”