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### DALLAS MORNING NEWS

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#### OPERA



Sarah Shatz

Reggie Whitehead appears as Sportin' Life in *Porgy and Bess*, coming to Bass Hall.

# Catfish Row comes to FW in updated 'Porgy'

By **PUNCH SHAW**  
Special Contributor

FORT WORTH — *Porgy and Bess* is still raising questions after three-quarters of a century.

The stage work by George Gershwin has 75 candles on its birthday cake this year — it debuted on Broadway in 1935 — a milestone being honored by a new touring production that comes to Bass Hall on Wednesday and Thursday.

Despite its long history, it's still dogged by two fundamental questions: Is it an

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8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday at Bass Performance Hall, Fourth and Commerce, Fort Worth. \$10 to \$65. 817-212-4280; [www.basshall.com](http://www.basshall.com).

opera or a musical? And does it demean blacks or celebrate their perseverance?

For this production's director, the first question is easy.

"There are certainly musical-theater elements in it," says director Charles Randolph-Wright. "But I think this is the great American

opera. Almost every word of it is sung. That's why it's an opera."

But the second question is a bit tougher.

"It's had a controversial history, especially with the African-American audience," says Randolph-Wright, who was in the original Broadway cast of *Dreamgirls*. "The problem with this piece is that it presents stereotypical images we don't want perpetuated in the black community."

Randolph-Wright was especially concerned about the portrayal of the disabled

male title character.

"Sometimes Porgy is portrayed as this downtrodden, pitiful character," says the director, while on a stop with the tour in Ohio. "But when I read the book, I realized that Porgy was the heart of the community. ... So, I don't have him on the cart. [Porgy often rolls about the stage on a 'goat cart.'] That image is so degrading. It is iconoclastic, but degrading."

He also wanted a different look for this production.

"I told my costume designer, 'No burlap on this stage,'" says Randolph-Wright, noting that the play's characters are often clothed in rags. But, since the context of the play depicts times when the characters would be dressed up to go out, Randolph-Wright wanted a "more elegant look."

"I used pictures of my relatives from the 1930s," says the native of South Carolina

who has relatives in Charleston, where this story is set.

*Porgy and Bess* is based on the novel *Porgy* by Charleston writer DuBose Heyward.

It tells the story of the denizens of Catfish Row, a fictional black neighborhood imagined to be in the author's hometown. It is a grim place where drinking and laughter only temporarily gloss over the pain of poverty.

A fight over a dice game leads to a murder in Act I that puts all the key elements in motion.

Set against this crime story is Porgy's love for Bess, a prostitute and girlfriend of the rough character Crown.

Porgy's quest to win Bess' heart is thwarted by various acts of man and nature — from thuggish white cops to a devastating hurricane. He wins a few victories along the way, but if you are expecting a happy ending, you obviously haven't seen many operas.

Still, Randolph-Wright finds some light at the end of this show's tunnel.

"I really wanted this to be a love story. I feel you need to believe that Porgy and Bess love each other for this opera to work. And for that reason, I think there is great hope and promise in this piece. I think it is a lesson in overcoming obstacles," he says.