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‘Porgy and Bess’ at the Bushnell: A drama of love, murder and hope on Catfish Row

By BONNIE GOLDBERG, Weekend Correspondent



The cast of Porgy and Bess is shown on stage (photo by Sarah Shatz)

In honor of the 75th anniversary of George Gershwin’s masterpiece of American opera, “Porgy and Bess,” a dazzling new production of this musical gem is being mounted, and producer Michael Capasso is at its heart and soul.

Capasso is no stranger to the operatic world. He was introduced by his Italian but non-musical Long Island family at age 7, when he saw the film “The Great Caruso,” starring the great American tenor Mario Lanza, followed by his first visit to the Metropolitan Opera House. By age 9 he was a regular attendee at the Met and by his teenage years he knew he wanted to grow up to be Rudolph Bing, the famed general manager at the Met for 22 years, a position that Capasso considered “the coolest job in life.”

When he had the opportunity to visit with Bing, the great man told the impressionable youth that he “had to be lucky,” and if the job is there, it will all work out.

As director, producer, writer, lecturer, filmmaker and entrepreneur, Capasso considers himself very blessed, as he enjoys and loves what he does. Whether he is founding and managing the National Lyric Opera and the Dicapo Opera Theatre, participating in and winning an international opera competition, directing every single one of Giacomo Puccini’s operas, certifying authentic Italian food in restaurants for the Italian government or receiving “Man of the Year” awards from the Italian Welfare League, Capasso lives and breathes the operatic world and lifestyle.

He is now investing his inventive spirit in the classic tale of “Porgy and Bess,” a story set in the splendid squalor of Catfish Row in Charleston, S.C. in the 1920s. He first saw the piece, considered the finest example of American musical history, in 1976 at Radio City Music Hall and a few years later at the Metropolitan Opera House.

“Flabbergasted” by its power, Capasso has wanted to do the piece for a long time, and he is having a “terrific” time being involved. In addition to the U.S. tour which comes to the Hartford’s Bushnell Performing Arts Center on Tuesday, June 8 to Sunday, June 13, the stellar cast and live orchestra, under the direction of Charles Randolph-Wright, with musical direction by Pacien Mazzagatti, will continue on to Europe, Israel and South America.

According to Capasso, he is involved in literally everything in the production — from the casting, the musical staff, the choice of the professionals selected, the costuming, where it will be performed and the design of the sets.

“There is not one aspect that doesn’t go through my hands, and if it’s wonderful I get the credit,” Capasso said. “If it isn’t wonderful, I get the credit for that too.”

This production, with the full approval of the Gershwin estate, came together with a cast of polished opera singers in December 2009 and opened in Ohio in early February 2010. The response has been consistent standing ovations every night.

The show, with a wealth of jazz, folk and blues tunes like “Summertime,” “I Got Plenty of Nuttin,” “Bess, You Is My Woman” and “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” is based on a novel by DuBose Heyward and was first performed in 1935. It tells the story of a crippled black beggar man, Porgy (Kevin Short, Patrick Blackwell), living in the slums of Charleston, and his diligent efforts to rescue Bess (Donita Volkwijn, Kishna Davis) from the grips held by Crown (Phillip Boykin), her abusive and violent lover, and the drug dealer, Sportin’ Life (Reggie Whitehead).

For tickets (\$15-\$72), call the Bushnell, 166 Capitol Ave., Hartford, at (860) 987-5900 or visit www.bushnell.org. Performances are Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at 7:30 p.m., Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Sunday at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

Let Capasso share his love of opera with you as composer George Gershwin, called the “Abraham Lincoln of Negro music,” presents the glorious “Porgy and Bess” for your enjoyment.