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'Porgy' tour will stop in Lafayette

By ROBIN MILLER

Jazz combined with spirituals and Americana.

George Gershwin somehow knew the musical dramas would perfectly mix with opera. And make no mistake – Porgy and Bess definitely is an opera.

“It has the formal structure of a grand opera and requires trained singers to perform it,” Michael Capasso said. “But it also weaves in all of these other genres, which is what makes it unique.”

Unique enough to be performed in the world’s great opera houses in the last 75 years.

Yes, 2010 marks the 75th anniversary for Porgy and Bess, and New York’s DiCapo Opera is celebrating with a tour of the opera.

of the tour production, which will make a stop on Sunday, March 7, at the Heymann Center for the Performing Arts.

The performance is sponsored by the Performing Arts Society of Acadiana.

“It’s the only production approved by the Gershwin estate to officially celebrate the 75th anniversary,” Capasso said. “So, this is special. If you want to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Porgy and Bess, then this is the production you should see.”

This is Capasso’s first time to work with the opera, though it has been a favorite since he first saw it in 1976. He considers it more than the great American opera.

“It’s in the canon of the world’s greatest operas,” Capasso said. “That includes the great European operas.”

Still, the music is distinctively American. It’s so, well, Gershwin.

Most music lovers immediately will recognize the opening song, “Summertime.” It’s been recorded and re-recorded by so many jazz greats. Pop music icons, too. One of the classic renditions was recorded by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald.

And the song sets the mood for Porgy and Bess. It’s summertime in the small Gullah community of Catfish Row, a poor district of early 20th century segregated Charleston, S.C.

The opera opened on Broadway in 1935. George Gershwin wrote the music, his brother Ira the lyrics, basing their story on DuBose Heyward’s novel Porgy. Heyward and his wife Dorothy also co-wrote a play of the same title.



Capasso is DiCapo Opera’s general director and producer. The DiCapo Opera’s production of Porgy and Bess is the only production approved by the George Gershwin estate to officially celebrate the opera’s 75th anniversary.

The story is based on the real-life 1920s African American community Cabbage Row in Charleston.

“It’s really a gated community,” Capasso said. “It’s small, and everyone knows everyone else. Most of the story takes place in this community, in its apartments and on its balconies.”

And haunting its streets is main character Porgy, a crippled, generous beggar who is hopelessly in love with a prostitute named Bess. He attempts to rescue Bess from the clutches of her violent, former lover Crown and her current, possessive lover Sportin’ Life.

Passion, jealousy, murder and poverty make up the heady brew of this evocative story.

“Previews of the opera played in Boston before it opened on Broadway,” Capasso said. “It was criticized for being too long, so Gershwin cut it. It was supposed to open in the Metropolitan Opera House, but that didn’t work out. So, it opened on Broadway.”

The opera finally played the Metropolitan Opera in 1985, nine years after it was performed by the Houston Grand Opera in 1976. It’s now considered part of the standard operatic repertoire and is regularly performed internationally.

And, of course, there are the string of hits that spun from it, including “It Ain’t Necessarily So” and “I Got Plenty of Nothin’.”

And yes, “Summertime.”

“Our cast for this production is good,” Capasso said. “Some have never performed in Porgy and Bess, and that’s a good thing, because this is a new approach. We’re not changing the story or music, but we have new costumes and backdrops, and we’re performing to a live orchestra.”

The performers who had experience with the opera were open to new ideas.

“They’re open and willing to try something different,” Capasso said.

Director Charles Randolph-Wright also is a first-timer when it comes to Porgy and Bess.

And all come together to tell this story filled with Gershwin’s combination of jazz, Americana, spiritual and opera.

Which, by opera standards, has become the perfect mix.