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MusicWorcester Presents Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess"

By Phyllis Nordstrom

Worcester, Massachusetts, 28 March 2010. A level of realism not often encountered in opera was achieved in the Michael Capasso/Willette Murphy Klausner production of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess", presented by MusicWorcester at the Hanover Theatre, 3 p.m. Sunday matinee. While "Porgy and Bess" expresses emotional reality that characterizes all of opera, the unity of this particular show produced an effect that was disturbingly real.

The brilliant, brief opening nightclub dance montage invited us to the theatre, into the illusions of carefree entertainment. But then, all too suddenly, using a simple but effective set change, we are plunged into the somber, colorless world of Catfish Row, Charleston, South Carolina. Clara stands alone, singing a lullaby to her baby, "Summertime, and the livin' is easy..." One of Gershwin's most famous songs, out of context to the opera, evokes a sultry, peaceful feeling; In this opening scene the effect is just the opposite: the "livin'" is anything but easy in Catfish Row. Musical irony at its best.

The contrast of breezy words with deplorable conditions not only brings one to stark awareness of the hardship of a poor African-American community in the early 20th century, but is a disturbing reminder that these same conditions prevail in many communities in American during our own economically disastrous times. While the words of "Summertime" draw emotion, Sequina Dubose, playing "Clara", performed the song more as a jaunty recital piece directed at the audience than as an intimate lullaby directed to her babe in arms. Still, the juxtaposition of set and music was profound enough to draw us, even against our will, into the life of Catfish Row.

"Porgy and Bess" is truly an opera, although this has been debated by music and theatre critics since its debut in 1935. The only spoken words are those of a white cop – an interesting device to set the Black community in stark relief against an implied ruling White culture. The language of "Porgy and Bess" portrays the local Gullah dialect, a blend of Creole and English, which sometimes makes it difficult to discern the lyrics, although from time to time it wasn't clear if this was predominantly due to poor diction on the part of the singers. Overall, the singing performances were rich, complex and profoundly beautiful. While "Bess's" voice was glorious (the part of Bess was sung by Kishna Davis), she did not always achieve perfect control at altitude.

Curiously, these imperfections only added to the sense of realism of the production as a whole. While musical quality is the hallmark of great opera, this opera actually benefits from imperfections, because the story is about our imperfections, our frequent challenges and moral failures.

Goodness and Evil were portrayed magnificently by Patrick Blackwell as "Porgy", and Phillip Boykin as "Crown". While wondering why these two men weren't performing with the Met, they were clearly the cornerstone of quality to this production. Not only in voice but in acting skill, these two formidable foes were so convincing that during the curtain call "Crown" was loudly booed by the audience. Evidence that he had done his job well, Phillip Boykin broke into a broad grin.

The delightful, snaky Devil, "Sportin' Life", played by Reggie Whitehead, distinguishes himself from the others at Catfish Row by performing more in the style of musical comedy than opera. "It Ain't Necessarily So", sung at the Palm Sunday picnic brought to mind some recent debates between scientists and theologians, the lyrics not so subtly suggesting that Doubt is a favorite tool of the Devil. However, throughout the show the "God-Fearing Women" keep Sportin' Life at bay. Combining fabulous acting and sumptuous vocals, "Serena", played by Reyna Carguill, and "Maria", played by Stephanie Beadle, are the moral compass of the community.

When "Bess" ultimately succumbs to the lure of the drug-pushing devil, "Sportin' Life", and disappears with him to New York, the two matriarchs, along with "Porgy", mourn the defeat of the vulnerable young woman in the magnificently stirring trio, "Where's My Bess/ Bess is Gone". Yet in Goodness there is always Hope, however remote, and so "Porgy" goes after "Bess", dragging himself along on his crutches.

The production is spare and supremely focused, achieving such continuity and flow that the three hour production passed all too quickly. The orchestra, conducted by Samuel Bill, was well integrated into the production, the instrumental underpinnings beautifully balanced with the chorus and soloists.

Phyllis Nordstrom is a freelance writer with background in classical piano, flute, and chorus. She has been involved in the production of numerous ballet performances on the West Coast and in Paris. Ms. Nordstrom now divides her time between residences in Massachusetts and Maine, and is an occasional contributor to Classical Voice.