

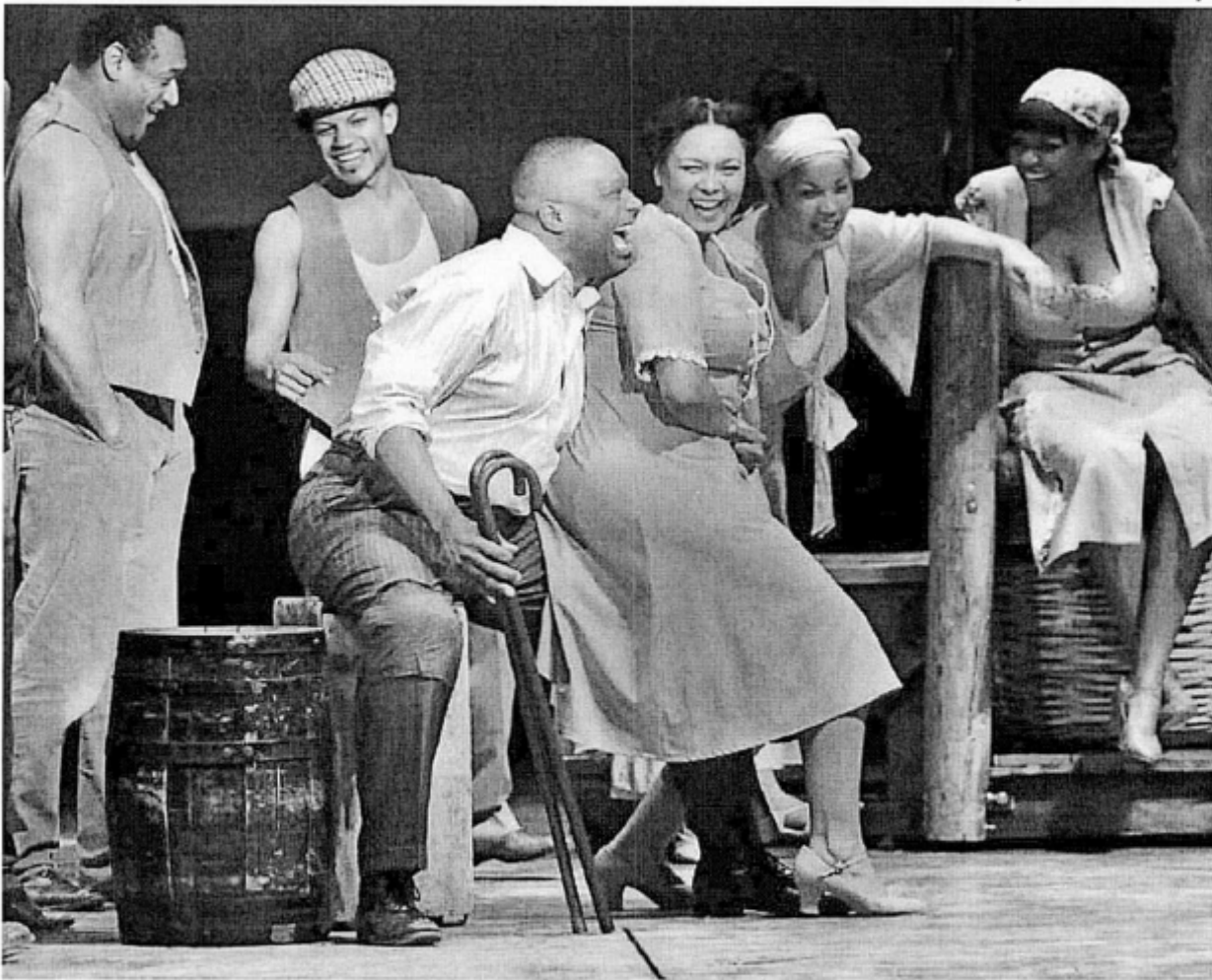
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'Porgy and Bess' provides high drama at Hanover

OPERA REVIEW By Dan Sweeney



The inhabitants of Catfish Row enjoy a picnic in a scene from "Porgy and Bess" at The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts. (T&G Staff/STEVE LANAVA)

On Sunday afternoon, under the auspices of Music Worcester Inc., the audience at the Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts was treated to high drama and passion in a very American setting, with jazz overtones and a string of hit tunes.

With all due reverence to Worcester's own John Adams, and his indomitable "Nixon in China," this is likely the greatest American opera ever.

I speak of the familiar setting of Catfish Row, a poverty-stricken black tenement in Charleston, S.C., and George Gershwin's most durable stage work, "Porgy and Bess."

Gershwin was mainly a self-taught composer, but from 1932 to 1936 he undertook a sustained period of musical study with Joseph Schillinger, particularly in the development of thematic material. Remembering DuBose Heyward's novel "Porgy," which he read in 1926, he put these new techniques to work.

Heyward had first promised the musical rights of "Porgy" to Gershwin, but gave them to Jerome Kern, and suggested strongly for Al Jolson as Porgy. Gershwin rejected this idea, saying "...the sort of thing I had in mind for Porgy is a much more serious thing than Jolson could ever do," and stipulated that his "American folk opera" be always performed by an all-black cast.

Some productions of "Porgy" tend toward the American musical style, and not toward the continuous action, leitmotif style of the opera Gershwin envisioned, but this was not the case in this production by the ubiquitous Michael Capasso as executive producer, Willette Murphy Klausner, producer, and Charles Randolph-Wright as director. This was a true, first-class production.

The role of Porgy for the Sunday performance was a wonderful baritone, Patrick Blackwell. He portrayed Porgy as very much a man of strong character, despite his handicap, and could dominate the stage whenever he was on. His lyric-styled baritone touchingly delivered "I Got Plenty of Nothin," and his singing with Bess, "Bess, You is My Woman Now," was beautifully blended.

Kishna Davis played Bess as the woman she is, good-natured and looking for a better life, but in the end weak of character, and addicted. Her soprano had a round color, but was very powerful, which she toned back to blend with Porgy.

In secondary roles was a well-rounded cast of classically trained singers.

Reggie Whitehead gave a slick, Cab Calloway-styled "Sportin' Life," and did a great job on "It Ain't Necessarily So," and "There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York." Phillip Boykin was the dutiful bass baritone Crown. Eric McKeever as Jake sang every man's lament, "A Woman is a Sometime Thing," and as his wife, Clara, Sequina Dubose did Clara's great hit "Summertime."

Special mention goes to Reyna Carguill as Serena, who stole the first act with her rendition of "My Man's Gone Now."

When Gershwin died two years after "Porgy and Bess" premiered, Arnold Schoenberg wrote: "Directness of his kind is only given to great men, and there is no doubt he was a great composer." That was certainly on display Sunday afternoon.