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Pathos and passion flare on Catfish Row

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Jake (Eric McKeever) and the fishermen from Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess."
Sarah Shatz / Photo

BURLINGTON, Vt. — Michael Capasso first saw "Porgy and Bess" at Radio City Music Hall in 1976.

He knew about the Gershwin folk opera but hadn't realized how monumentally great the work was. Set in 1920s Charleston, the American masterpiece chronicles the tumultuous romance between Porgy, a crippled beggar, and Bess, a scarlet woman, on Catfish Row, a fictitious waterfront slum based on Cabbage Row in South Carolina.

George Gershwin composed the music. Dubose Heyward wrote the libretto, which is based on "Porgy," a novel and play he wrote with his wife, Dorothy Heyward. Ira Gershwin wrote additional lyrics.

"I had known some of the famous songs and seen the movie," said Capasso, who is founder and general director of Dicapo Theatre Opera in New York City.

"The movie, frankly, hadn't impressed me. The staged production really made me want, at that point, to find a way to try to do it."

DIGNIFIED STAGING

Years passed. This year marked the 75th anniversary of the opera's debut. It hadn't toured in the United States, so no "Summertime," "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'" or "It Ain't Necessarily So" had been heard for a very long time.

"The time was right. I decided to take on this project."

The Flynn Center for the Performing Arts presents Capasso's production of "Porgy and Bess" tonight in Burlington.

Capasso produced the work in association with Willette Murphy Klausner. Directed by Charles Randolph-Wright and conducted by Pacien Mazzagatti, the production stars Leonard Rowe and Patrick Blackwell as Porgy and Donita Volkwijn and Kishna Davis as Bess.

"It's a new production created to especially celebrate the 75th anniversary," Capasso said. "We have a dynamic cast and beautiful new scenery (John Farrell), costumes (Ildikó Martá Debreczeni) and excellent staging. We love the new staging created by Charles Randolph-Wright."

After almost 30 performances, the 75th anniversary tour has received rave reviews.

"People love it," Capasso said. "They love the way it looks, the costumes and staging. It's a very dignified staging. The approach of the director was to give a sense of community to these people, a sense of dignity, not to wear rags but wear their nicest clothes. We see them on a Saturday evening, at church or at a funeral."

PATHOS, PASSION

First and foremost in Capasso's opinion, "Porgy and Bess" is the greatest American opera.

"It depicts life in the '20s in the South, which was still segregated. It's a period piece. We treat it as such. What was significant about it, among many things, it has provided opportunities for classically trained black singers to perform since 1935. For a great majority of that time, opera was still, by and large, a segregated art form. 'Porgy and Bess' was an outlet for classically trained black performers to hone their craft."

Pathos and passion, all the elements of a grand opera, are in "Porgy and Bess."

"It has arias, duets and large choral scenes. It has great drama, romance, violence. It has the tragedy of murder. It has got everything all the great operas have. It's American verismo opera. ... The music accompanies this poignant story perfectly. We hope people will follow the journey of Porgy and are able to enjoy everything that happened."

The original musical production debuted during the Great Depression. During today's Great Recession, "Porgy and Bess" has only one-nighters in theaters instead of three or four performances.

"People are going to the theater but not in great amounts as in the past. You have the challenge of raising money in this climate, but on the other hand, there has been a great challenge in the opera world. Many companies have closed or reduced their season resulting in a lot of available talent. It's good. We're able to get performers that may not have been available to us in a more prosperous time.

"Porgy and Bess" has been a great experience for Capasso.

"Because everything has really turned out and met and exceeded my expectations on every level," he said. "I'm very proud of the production."