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Photo: Robert Millard, courtesy of LA Opera

Porgy shines in LA Opera's second cast of 'Porgy and Bess.'

**GEORGE GERSHWIN
PORGY AND BESS
LOS ANGELES OPERA
MAY 5, 2007**

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Los Angeles Opera expects great things with its current production of "Porgy and Bess." The production represents the company's continued attempt to bring younger people and more of them into the opera house. Most of the operas this season have had a seven-show run, but "Porgy" was set for twelve, which has necessitated double casting. The show opened on May 4 with the first cast and on May 5 with the second, which is the cast I am reviewing here.

Before progressing, however, I find it necessary to say that this season, LA Opera has had more than its fair share of “light” productions – productions which are somewhere between opera and musical theater: “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,” “The Merry Widow,” “Porgy and Bess” and an upcoming “Luisa Fernanda.” While all of these require classically trained opera singers and are part of any opera company’s roster, bunching them all together has made this reviewer long for a “Tosca,” or anything reminiscent of bel canto or verismo. Operettas are great fun, especially during the Christmas holidays or around New Year’s Eve, but LA Opera has carried it a little bit too far this season.

That said, George Gershwin called “Porgy and Bess” a folk opera. It has more singing than dialogue and contains arias and leitmotifs, yet it could probably more effectively be staged in a Broadway theater than an opera house, but then again, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion represents the best of both worlds.

First performed in 1935 in New York, the critics were contentious about the authenticity of the piece. Gershwin was a Jewish composer who was born in Brooklyn. He had written a score based on a novel and play by DuBose Heyward, who was also white, and Heyward wrote the libretto with Gershwin’s brother, Ira Gershwin. “How authentic could the opera be?” some critics questioned. Set in the early 20th century, it depicted the black experience in Charleston, South Carolina along the waterfront tenement area known as Catfish Row. The critics questioned how Gershwin could profess to understand the racial tensions between blacks and whites at the time, but Gershwin did his homework and traveled to South Carolina while composing the score to be accurate. Ragtime, jazz and blues had been incorporated into his earlier music. He was interested in black America, and “Porgy and Bess” fit the bill.

The plot touchingly tells the story of Porgy, a crippled begger, and Bess, the woman he shelters after her lover Crown has killed a man named Robbins during a game of craps. But Bess cannot escape from her questionable lower-class sleazy background. Crown returns and almost rapes her, and Sportin’ Life, a dope peddler, runs off with her to New York when Porgy is held by the police after killing Crown. As the curtain falls, Porgy poignantly sings of the journey he will take to reunite with his lover.

Judging from the reviews of the first cast, it appears that the second one might be somewhat lacking. Alan Rich for Daily Variety called the first principals, “a gathering of showstoppers.” Unfortunately, the only showstopper in the second cast was bass-baritone Alfred Walker (Porgy). Walker was truly wonderful: his joyful “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin” on the apron of the stage, his heart-rending “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” his desperate “Oh Bess, Oh Where’s My Bess,” and his “Oh, Lawd, I’m On My Way.” His voice was warm, engaging and mellow; his acting drew in an empathetic audience, and he skillfully executed the choreographed movement throughout. His fight scene with Crown was a work of dance-like art thanks to fight coordinators Charles Currier and Tim Brown.

The sets, designed by Peter J. Davison, were pieced together with what looked like rusty

iron and leveled to create a feeling of skeletal fragility. The sporadic lighting, as above the doors and during the hurricane, was striking and attention-getting, and Francesca Zambello's directing was right on target. In so many operas, the singers can sing, but they struggle to portray their characters. In this production from the Washington National Opera, the singers' acting was realistic and believable. Choreographer Jennie Ford effectively used Denni Sayers' choreography from the original production, and John DeMain conducted eloquently in the pit. His historic 1976 Houston production of "Porgy and Bess" garnered him both a Tony and a Grammy.

Yet in spite of all the positive aspects of the production, I just couldn't warm up to Indira Mahajan's Bess. I didn't sympathize with Bess's predicament and didn't like the character enough. Although Mahajan's lower tones were earthy, her higher notes were far less pleasing, yet she still enabled Gershwin's fine numbers to stand on their own.

Terry Cook as Crown was convincing in voice, acting and body movement. The seduction scene was a winner. And Victor Ryan Robertson (Sportin' Life) was an agile song-and-dance man reminiscent of Ben Vereen. His "It Ain't Necessarily So" was light and airy and seemed to shout: "Broadway, Here I Come."

Monique McDonald's Serena was touching, and Alyson Cambridge's Clara sang a lovely rendition of "Summertime," although the sound was a little thin on the top. Eric Greene (Jake) did a fine job with "A Woman is a Sometime Thing," and Marietta Simpson (Maria) delivered her lines with punch.

The supporting cast, chorus and supernumeraries were excellent, but the evening seemed long and drawn out. "Porgy and Bess" is a three-act opera with nine scenes. L.A. Opera has divided it into two acts with one intermission. The original three-act version with two intermissions might have been a better way to go. But then again, maybe the first cast was more invigorating.

Conductor, John DeMain
Director, Francesca Zambello
Associate Director, Garnett Bruce
Assistant Director, Rita D'Angelo Tikador
Original Choreography, Denni Sayers
Choreographer, Jennie Ford
Set Designer, Peter J. Davison
Costume Designer, Paul Tazewell
Lighting Designer, Mark McCullough
Fight Coordinators, Charles Currier & Tim Brown
Concertmaster, Stuart Canin
Chorus Master, William Vendice