

## **A vivid, rollicking tour of Catfish Row at Lyric**

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John von Rhein | Tribune critic

It took a long pull to get here. Those of us who despaired of ever hearing George and Ira Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" at Lyric Opera of Chicago were rewarded for our patience at the Civic Opera House on Tuesday when the Lyric presented this enduring slice of American verismo for the first time, in a joyous and compelling production.

The company could not have chosen a timelier moment to stage the great American opera whose performance history has been founded on the aspirations of African-Americans.

Notice, if you will, how a strong musical performance and Francesca Zambello's fluid, cinematic direction (Denni Sayers supplies the terrific choreography) serve each other's best interests.

Watch Jermaine Smith—light on his dancing feet, with a clear high tenor to match—deliver Sportin' Life's showstopping "It Ain't Necessarily So" with a balletic split. The three-hour opera moves like the snazziest of Broadway blockbusters.

Zambello makes a real community out of Catfish Row, filled with flesh-and-blood individuals living out their ordinary lives within Peter J. Davison's beautifully ramshackle designs. There are no dramatic dead spots between the big songs. Although the period has been updated from the 1920s to the '50s, the problems of this closed society are ones African-Americans on the lowest rung of the ladder still face today.

In this claustrophobic society the good-time girl Bess (soprano Morenike Fadayomi) finds temporary salvation in the arms of the crippled, kindly beggar Porgy (baritone Gordon Hawkins).

Not the least of the show's strengths is the conducting of John DeMain. His easy authority tells in every bluesy turn of phrase, in the smooth melding of stage and pit. What a luxury it is to hear George Gershwin's great score so sumptuously played by full orchestra.

For its 14 performances (an extra one was added for Dec. 16), the Lyric is double-casting the principal parts.

Heading the first cast, Fadayomi and Hawkins evidently were chosen more for their acting than singing abilities. The soprano oozes sexual allure as the much-abused Bess; too bad her tonal steadiness is a sometime thing. Hawkins, outfitted with a crutch rather than the usual goat cart, makes a sympathetic Porgy, a big man with a big heart.

Lester Lynch is a hulking, baritonally solid Crown whose brute strength makes apparent why Bess could be so readily hypnotized. Mezzo-soprano Marietta Simpson draws you to her earthy Maria. Soprano Jonita Lattimore brings down the house with Serena's poignant lament, "My Man's Gone Now."

Soprano Laquita Mitchell, as the young mother Clara, makes "Summertime" a tender lullaby. Eric Greene as the hearty fisherman Jake, Daniel Billings as the weaselly lawyer Frazier, Cheryl Warfield as the Strawberry Woman, and various other supporting and spoken roles are very capably taken.

How many productions of "Porgy and Bess" can boast an ensemble as brilliant as this?

The specially formed chorus sings well and with real dramatic involvement, making a mighty sound when the townsfolk cower in terror as a hurricane rages through Catfish Row.

Never mind “Wicked.” Forget “Jersey Boys.” The hottest show in town is Lyric’s “Porgy and Bess.” For certain it boasts a musical score whose lyric gems you’ll be humming for weeks.

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When: Through Dec. 19

Where: Civic Opera House,

20 N. Wacker Drive

Tickets: \$32-\$197;

312-827-5600; [lyricopera.org](http://lyricopera.org)