

Opera updates stirring 'Porgy and Bess'

San Francisco Chronicle

Sunday, June 7, 2009

Jesse Hamlin

The night Barack Obama was elected president, the cast of "Porgy and Bess" was rehearsing at the Chicago Lyric Opera, where the elation on the streets was shared by the singers in the opera house.

"The fact that we happened to be there for 'Porgy,' it was quite amazing and moving," says soprano Laquita Mitchell. She played Clara in the Chicago production of Gershwin's stirring 1935 folk opera - then, as now, sung entirely by African American artists - and makes her debut as the life-hardened Bess when San Francisco Opera presents the work in seven performances starting Tuesday.

"There were cast members who cried and said they never thought they'd see a black man as president," recalls Mitchell, who entered the world of Catfish Row - the fictional black Charleston, S.C., slum where Porgy, Bess and others strive to live and love - when director Francesca Zambello cast her in the 2005 Washington Opera production that arrives this week with bass-baritone Eric Owens making his debut as the crippled beggar Porgy.

Not just a 'black' opera

"Some people want to call this a black opera. I call it an opera," says Mitchell, talking at the Opera House on a recent afternoon. "It's a great piece of theater. The music is so touching and so lyrical.

"It's one of the best operas ever written by an American composer. I've done a lot of new American works, and nothing compares to this."

Zambello goes even further. The director calls the once-controversial work not only the greatest American opera but "the greatest opera of the 20th century." That's why she begged Washington Opera General Director Placido Domingo to let her direct "Porgy and Bess" when she heard the company was planning a new production four years ago.

"I wanted to do it in a big production in a big opera house, with the best singers, chorus and orchestra."

As a student, Zambello had listened to the magnificent recording of "Porgy and Bess" by Houston Grand Opera, which in 1976, under the leadership of David Gockley, now the boss at San Francisco Opera, restored the original Gershwin score and presented the full opera for the first time (the composer had cut it for the Broadway premiere).

But it wasn't until Zambello read the novel "Porgy" (and the subsequent play) by Gershwin's collaborator DuBose Heyward that she realized the scope of the work.

"The novel is so moving," says Zambello, whose creative team includes conductor John DeMain, who led the groundbreaking Houston "Porgy" production and made his San Francisco debut conducting it in 1977.

"It just captured these people, simple people in such an epic way. Which is very much the genius of this story. The musical score elevates it to something highly spiritual, with a great, evocative spirit, like 'Boris Godunov' or 'Peter Grimes.' It's the universality of the story, people questing for something, that makes such powerful material for opera."

Originally set in the 1920s, this "Porgy and Bess" is set in the '50s, a time of rising racial tension and the birth of the civil rights movement in America. Zambello and the production's designer, Peter Davison, felt the typical '20s setting "distanced us too much from today." Updating Catfish Row - depicted here as a claustrophobic space that Zambello describes as a kind of abstracted tenement - "gave the performers a more personal connection to the material," says the director, who likens "Porgy" to works by Mozart and Verdi in its exploration of race and class, and the telling of a personal story in a larger social context.

Eric Owens first encountered bits of "Porgy" as a kid growing in Philadelphia. He remembers being bowled over by "It Ain't Necessarily So" at an outdoor concert. But it wasn't until years later that he heard the opera in all its depth and beauty.

"I'd heard the hit tunes, but I didn't know the opera as a whole," says Owens, 38, who made his San Francisco Opera debut as Lodovico in "Otello" in 2002 and originated the role of Gen. Leslie Groves in the premiere of John Adams' "Doctor Atomic" here in 2005. His speaking voice is as richly resonant as his singing voice. "When I started learning it, wow, there was so much more to it than 'Summertime.' It's really been exciting to appreciate Gershwin in a different way, for lack of a better word, as a 'serious' composer, whatever that means," he adds with a laugh.

Playing Porgy, a lonely man whose salvation is his love for the abused, drug-hooked Bess, "demands a lot," Owens says. "There's a very wide emotional range, and it's physically very demanding. There's a vulnerability to Porgy - maybe that's built in with his disability - but there's a strength to him as well. He's a complex guy. There's a tenderness there, he's very gentle with Bess, but he can have a temper. He's very much a part of the community, but he's an outsider at the same time. He's part of that big family, but he goes back to his room alone."

In the past, some African American singers were leery about appearing in the opera; they didn't want to be pigeonholed as a "black" singer confined to a show about African Americans, and resented not being hired for roles in other operas.

"This piece has somewhat of a rocky history," Owens says, "with people thinking of it as racist and whatnot in various decades since the '30s. But I think we're now at the point where we can just enjoy it as the wonderful piece of music theater that it is, with these very complex characters."

Mitchell strives to express the complexity of Bess' character.

"It's important for me to show that she's human," says the soprano, who came through the Opera's Merola program in 2002. "She has a lot of flaws. She's had a hard life. She's never experienced unconditional love. She loves Porgy, but not really. There are things about her that are really ugly, but there's a softer side to her as well. You hear that in the 'Bess, You Is My Woman' duet. I have to convey that."

A new light

The full-scale Houston production that Gockley, DeMain and director Jack O'Brien mounted 33 years ago cast "Porgy" in a brilliant new light and launched it into the international operatic repertoire. In addition to the splendid music - which draws on spirituals, blues and jazz and the language and forms of romantic and modern European music - one of the reasons that the opera has lasted "is the fact that it's a great love story," DeMain says. "And in that community, there's a real breadth of humanity, fishermen who provide for the community, people like Sportin' Life, who are bloodsuckers, who feed on the community. It's so rich in that way. It seems to be a story that can be told over and over again."

For Gockley, who shares DeMain's pride in placing "Porgy" in the grand operatic setting Gershwin envisioned, the sense of spiritual resilience and hope among the denizens of Catfish Row has a special resonance in the age of Obama.

"I feel there's much more of a sense of pride among the performers," Gockley said. "It's a joy."