

PORGY AND BESS

Music by George Gershwin

Libretto by Dubose Heyward, Lyrics by Ira Gershwin and Dubose Heyward

Virginia Opera

Harrison Opera House April 10,11,14,16 and 18

For tickets: 1-866-673-7282

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

There are rare auspicious times when the stars and planets that guide theatrical productions are in perfect alignment. Director Greg Ganakas and company have been blessed with such an occasion. From the directors and designers to the smallest chorus member, all are on the same wave length.

This ain't Catfish Row as you may remember it with a giant, multi-storied realistic set. No indeed. The walls have come tumbling" down. Since the Gershwins, like Leonard Bernstein, loved many styles of music one feels they would be pleased with the Broadway musical theatre feeling that underlies this PORGY. In operatic productions, the music always comes first even if credibility is sacrificed. In its best efforts the Broadway musical, on the other hand, attempts to fulfill the musical demands but also aspires to truthfulness and skill in acting and dancing.

The stage as defined by Ganakas, along with Scenic Designer Howard Jones and Lighting Designer Kenneth L. Steadman, sizzles with vibrant theatricality. Jones' imaginative sets are light and airy and dissolve and become something else with cinematic fluidity. Steadman, who always provides superb lighting, has surpassed himself with stunning electrical magic that establishes mood and dazzles the eye with spectacular effects that enhance Jones' scenery and give it a life of its own.

There is fine, carefully wrought character definition in each and every man and woman who lives in Catfish Row. Michael Redding is an endearing and forceful Porgy whose easy flowing, strong baritone has many emotional layers. He gets around on a crutch, by the way, instead of on the little pad on wheels. Bess, as written, is the most difficult role in the show. She has quick changes of behavior as the battered prostitute who is at the center of the love triangle between Porgy and Crown. The very strong soprano, Kearstin Piper Brown is more than up to the challenge and captures the uncontrollable sensuality that damns Bess to a life of pain. Baritone Timothy Robert Blevins is quite simply the best Crown I've ever seen. His physical prowess, his acting and frightening vocal intensity make for a chilling but compelling, sexual presence. Lawrence Craig has a grand time as Sportin' Life and finds every note of this oily but likeable man. You don't take your eyes off the entertaining Linda Thompson Williams as Maria.

As Serena, special mention must be made of Aundi Marie Moore's moving rendition of My Man's Gone Now, a lament over her dead husband's body. It's an emotional high point and really gets the action underway in the first act. Nicole Jenkins as Clara sings Summertime while standing on an elevated rotating platform. The staging detracts from the haunting song's effectiveness. She fares much in the second act reprise.

Local gospel choirs are used in the finale. This is a splendid idea. It elevates the spiritual ending to one of tragic majesty. Maestro Peter Mark elicits all the colorful jazzy-bluesy sounds from the Richmond Symphony plus the dramatic bombast of the storm with dramatic richness.

This thrilling conception of a 75 year old classic gives the opera an exciting new life. It may sound crass, but it comes from the heart, when I use Broadway show business lingo to say it's a socko, boffo hit.

This Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.