

Summertime on Catfish Row Tulsa Opera's 'Porgy and Bess' shines

By JAMES D. WATTS JR.
World Scene Writer

review

It's been two decades since Tulsa Opera last presented George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." The production the company opened Saturday at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center is more than worth the wait.

One reason for that length of time between these two productions is that, by any standard, "Porgy and Bess" is an ambitious undertaking.

The opera requires a large cast that — with a few exceptions — must consist entirely of black performers who can handle colloquial and classical singing with authority. It also needs an orchestra that can move easily among a range of musical styles not often heard coming from an opera pit.

And "Porgy and Bess" needs a director who understands that this opera is very much a piece of its time, that the sordid and troubling aspects of the story are as integral to the artistic whole as the beauty of a melody like "Summertime."

Tulsa Opera's "Porgy and Bess" has all these qualities in place, and they come together in a production that is vital and vivid, that makes the inhabitants of Catfish Row seem as real and natural as a group of people, who sing with every breath, can be.

That balance between the violence of the story and the beauty of the music is the heart of "Porgy and Bess," and it must be carefully maintained for the opera to succeed.

Music is the sound of hope for the people of Catfish Row, whose lives are proscribed by the unforgiving sea on one side and the casual yet ingrained hatred embodied in the few authority figures — cops and corners, mainly — who deign to visit this community.

Which they do whenever there's been a killing in Catfish Row. The first one comes early, when a dice game goes bad and the stevedore Crown (John Fulton) brutally murders Robbins (Colin Eaton). Crown runs off before the police arrive, leaving behind Bess (Donita Volkwin), who has been living with him for five years.

No one wants to have anything to do with her, except for Sportin' Life (Chauncey Packer), who sees Bess as a ticket to the high life in the big cities, and Porgy (Brian Matthews), a good-natured, good-hearted beggar.

Bess wisely takes up with Porgy, and makes an effort to clean up her life and fit into the community of Catfish Row. But the insidious Sportin' Life with his packets of "happy dust" and the murderous Crown are determined to bring Bess down to their level.

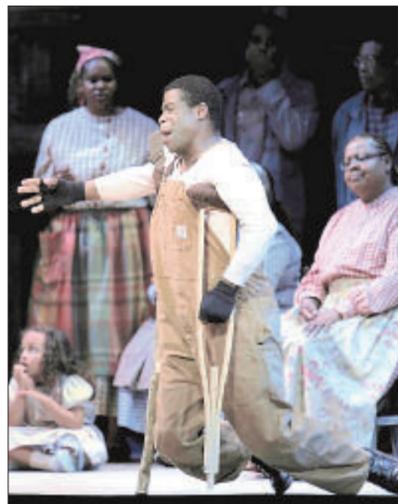
This is Matthews' first time to sing the role of Porgy, and he has given himself over to this character in a most impressive way. On a purely physical level, he is so convincing at portraying the character's disability that some people on opening night seemed surprised when he climbed out of the cart to take his bows.

Vocally, the role is perhaps a little high for Matthews — he sings it well, but one can sense a bit of effort to hit some of the high notes. But, if anything, it adds poignancy to the character, a vulnerability that suits the duet "Bess, You Is My Woman



Photos by MICHAEL WYKE / Tulsa World

Brian Matthews portrays Porgy and Donita Volkwin plays Bess during Tulsa Opera's production of Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." Below right, Matthews was so convincing in playing a crippled character that some audience members seemed surprised when he stood to take his bows at the end of the play. Below left, Volkwin, in a tender scene with Matthews, plays the Bess character more as an innocent caught up in circumstances than a hard-hearted harlot.



Now," and makes Porgy's philosophical "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" sound a little less carefree.

Volkwin is also a newcomer to her role as Bess, and she plays this character more as an innocent caught up in circumstances than a hard-hearted harlot. Volkwin makes you think that Bess really belongs in the world of Catfish Row rather than on some neon-lit street, something that comes through in "I Loves You, Porgy" and in her reprise of "Summertime."

Packer's Sportin' Life is a deliciously devilish character, someone whose greatest joy is leading others into temptation. Whether mocking the pious in "It Ain't Necessarily So" or enticing Bess with the promise that "There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York," Packer doesn't soften the character's rapacious nature.

Hope Briggs brings a religious fervor to Serena — even her funeral lament, "My Man's Gone Now," is sung not as a dirge but as if the mournful words contain a hint of hope. Gwendolyn Brown brings a large helping of sass to the role

of Maria; her face-off with Sportin' Life is one of the comic highlights of the opera.

Awet Andemicael and Joseph Wright are excellent as Clara and Jake, and do marvelous work on "Summertime" and "A Woman is a Sometime Thing," respectively. Calvin Lee and Tavis Minner do fine work as Peter the Honeyman, and as the Crab Man.

If there is a weak link in the cast, it is Fulton as Crown. He sings well enough, and moves around the stage with a jittery energy, but he never manifests the sense of power and menace the character needs. You don't understand Bess' attraction to him, nor do you fear for Porgy in their fight scene.

That said, Erick Vaughn Wolfe staged to opera's two fight scenes quite well — the battle between Crown and Robbins unfolded with vicious speed, and Matthews' ability to move about by using only his hands during the Crown-Porgy fight was quite remarkable.

Director Johnathon Pape's work here is some of his best, at making the necessarily styl-

ized action of the opera unfold as realistically as possible, without sentimentality or sensationalism.

Tulsa Opera general director Carol I. Crawford led the Tulsa Opera Orchestra, which played Gershwin's score about as well as I've heard it. Opera orchestras rarely have to know how to swing, but this group can, and did.

Special attention must be paid to the chorus Tulsa Opera put together for this production. For some of the performers, this was their first experience on an opera stage. But I doubt anyone would have thought that. Under chorusmaster Kostis Protopapas' direction, the chorus for "Porgy and Bess" shone in every scene, from the funeral scene to the finale, "O Lawd, I'm On My Way."

"Porgy and Bess" continues with performances at 7:30 p.m. Friday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. For tickets, call 596-7111 or visit www.MyTicketOffice.com.

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'Lost in Yonkers' never loses its way

By KAREN SHADE
World Scene Writer

review

Two brothers wonder what happened to their carefree lives in the staging of "Lost in Yonkers," but Theatre Tulsa takes no wrong turns with the Neil Simon drama-comedy, which opened Friday at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

Simon won a Pulitzer Prize for this story about two boys who find themselves crashing with their tack-spitting grandma in her Yonkers, N.Y., home while their father, Eddie, heads for the open road to pay back a loan shark — a debt incurred to care for the boys' mother before she died.

Jay and his kid brother Arty crack jokes about grandma and their aunts. Bella is 35, still living at home and generally supposed to be unintelligent, while Gert is timid and has trouble breathing and speaking at the same time whenever she's around the old homestead.

But "Yonkers" isn't typical coming-of-age-stuff. Jay and Arty have been brought up out of harm's way and have seen their grandmother only a few times. They are more witnesses to the dysfunctional relationships between their relatives. The brothers are the catalysts for this tale, but Bella's longing for a life of her own and her experiences make "Yonkers" compelling and thoroughly engrossing.

Billie Sue Thompson delivers a solid production and directs a truly outstanding cast, with Harriet Chenault at the anchor as Bella. Karyn Lee Maio as Grandma, Noel Fairbrothers as Gert and Kurt Harris as Eddie display some strong ensemble work, as do the show's youngest players. Sean Harris, as Jay, and George Owens, as Arty, are believable as brothers stuck together in a less-than-ideal situation.

They never stick closer together, however, than the night shady Uncle Louie sneaks into the little apartment over the candy store. The mob's bag man is hiding from other gangsters. Carrying a mysterious bag and packin' heat in the form of a revolver, Louis' tough-guy demeanor makes him as comical as he can be intimidating.

James Fields reveals himself as a consummate actor, giving us a Louis of varying tones. Fields puts force into this role, measured not in volume but presence.

Maio had a few problems on opening night with some of her lines, and the realistic but flat set makes you wonder how anyone could fit in such a small bathroom, but "Yonkers" holds it together through the rough spots.

Audience members waited for the inevitable, which never came, when Bella set out a chair with a slanted front leg at the start of the play's climactic scene. If you were in the audience, it was plain that anyone sitting in that chair was about to end up on the floor. But Chenault, a true professional, diverted attention from the chair when she sat in it and her characterization never broke, even when the leg did. Chenault never ended up on the floor and continued with the play's most pivotal scene. Desperate Bella persists and shows her mother and family she is not the person they assumed her to be. Most satisfying to us, Grandma sees the same thing for the first



Photos by MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World

Harriet Chenault portrays Bella in Theatre Tulsa's "Lost in Yonkers" on stage at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. Below, brothers Arty (George Owens, left) and Jay (Sean Harris, right) welcome home mobster Uncle Louie (James Fields, center.)



time.

Chenault shows us precisely what Bella is and by Bella's own description — a personality conflicted between the childlike identity she's been assigned by others and the longing woman she has been growing into under the radar. Chenault's Bella is optimistic despite the damage, but Chenault remains convincing.

"Lost in Yonkers" (which hit Broadway in 1991) sometimes feels old-fashioned in the canon of contemporary American drama, and not in the nostalgic sense. The structure is familiar. Characters almost seem timed to reveal their weight and burdens at intervals. But when they do expose those meatier qualities that make them more than faint figures dealt in a game of light drama, the live experience is so much more satisfying for us.

These characters share a history, and both cast and audience feel it. By play's end, this clan may not be scheduling family vacations together, but its members have reached a myriad of understandings.

"Lost in Yonkers" continues its run at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center's Liddy Doenges Theatre, Second Street and Cincinnati Avenue, at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday.

Tickets are \$17.50 general admission, \$15 for seniors and \$12 for students. Tickets are available at the PAC box office, online at www.MyTicketOffice.com and by phone at 596-7111.

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Bob Wills' fiddling honored at Cain's Ballroom benefit

By MATT ELLIOTT
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Texas fiddler Bob Wills was inducted into the newly founded National Fiddler Hall of Fame during a Friday night gala filled with country, blues, bluegrass and Irish fiddle performances.

About 170 people attended the \$130-per-plate gala at Cain's Ballroom while thunderstorms blew by outdoors and rainwater trickled down the "Ballroom Dancing" sign out front. John Wooley, a Wills historian and former Tulsa World music writer, was the master of ceremonies for the event, a benefit for the Hall of Fame.

"I know he would be so thrilled," said Wills' daughter, Rosetta Wills, upon accepting her late father's induction into the hall. After thanking the ballroom's

owners, the Rodgers family, for restoring it, she said that if her humble father were alive today, he'd be blown away by the induction.

Wills, who died in 1975, made his name at Cain's Ballroom, where he moved from Texas after a falling-out with his former manager, W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel. He and his Texas Playboys performed at the ballroom from 1934 until about 1942, when he left for California. His performances were broadcast by KVOO, making him a star. His brother, Johnnie Lee Wills, took over after Wills left, and he performed at Cain's for years.

The night was topped off with performances by at least 15 of the best fiddle players in the world.

One of them, Curly Lewis, played for

Bob Wills. Lewis, his voice gravelly from throat cancer, entertained with his Western swing fiddling backed at times by Hall of Fame Vice President Shelby Eicher and guitarist Mark Bruner.

The crowd got a taste of bluegrass from Byron Berline, contest fiddling from the "Hee Haw" star Jana Jae, and blues fiddle from James Tarver of Tulsa.

Wills also got the nod from Oklahoma Stomp, a nine-piece band of area teenagers that plays Western swing tunes, which drew standing ovations.

Many of the members would perform later that night with the older performers, and Jae was joined onstage by the local fiddlers Emma and Marina Pendleton, who recently won fame for their high ranking in a contest on CBS' "The Early Show."

Eicher summed up jazz fiddle for the crowd, playing a rendition of George Gershwin's "Summertime" and some Gypsy-flavored jazz. Eric Ryan-Johnson put an international flair on the night with his Irish folk fiddle.

The evening ended with all the players on the stage for a rendition of Wills' "Liberty," followed by a house band including steel guitarist J.D. Walters, Lewis, Bruner and Eicher playing for the guests who scooted across the ballroom's approximately 80-year-old dance floor.

The hall, which will be housed in Tulsa at a site to be determined later, will be dedicated to preserving the fiddle's history as well as encouraging youths to play the instrument.

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Rosetta Wills, Bob Wills' daughter, accepts an award for her father at his posthumous induction into the newly founded National Fiddler Hall of Fame at a gala Friday at Cain's Ballroom.

SHERRY BROWN / Tulsa World